Burning Forest Biomass—
the EU’s False Climate Solution

Why burning trees won’t solve Europe’s climate, biodiversity
and air pollution crises and how we can fix this mess

The EU is proud of its reputation as a green leader. We make bold promises to reduce emissions, boost renewable energy and safeguard biodiversity. But Europe has a dirty secret: much of its “renewable” energy comes from logging and burning forest wood for heat and power, which degrades forests and increases greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. On top of that, the public pays for this damage with over €6 billion in renewable energy subsidies per year, and the appetite for wood fuel keeps growing.

The EU’s Renewable Energy Directive (RED II) is directly responsible for an explosion in wood consumption across Europe. It is time to reform the RED II — and the opportunity is before us in 2021.

False climate solutions:
Let’s not burn our bridge to the future
When it comes to solving the climate crisis, trees and forests already have a job to do — and it’s not feeding fires and power stations. Forests capture and store carbon from the atmosphere, locking it away in wood and soils. Burning wood emits more CO₂ pollution per unit energy than even coal, and since trees don’t re-grow overnight, the CO₂ remains in the atmosphere, warming the climate for decades to centuries.

Healthy, natural forests are the most effective way to take CO₂ out of the air, but most of Europe’s forests are heavily managed and in poor condition. According to current projections, by 2026 the EU will lose 11% of its forest “carbon sink” compared to the average level in 2016–2018.

To avoid disastrous climate change we have to reduce CO₂ emissions by 50% over the next 10 years, which means reducing the amount of CO₂ going up smokestacks and increasing CO₂ uptake by forests. The EU is proposing to plant 3 billion trees to help reduce CO₂ in the air. At the same time, EU renewable energy policy continues to promote burning trees as “zero carbon” fuel. These two policies contradict each other, and each costs billions of euros per year. The EU has built itself a climate trap — and it needs help getting out.
“When we lose forests, we don’t ‘just’ lose green space or natural habitat. We lose a key ally in our fight against climate change.”
European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, January 2021

Clean air for all: Burning wood as fuel is a deadly mistake

Burning wood isn't just bad for the climate. Fuelwood and other solid fuels are responsible for 39% of the particulate matter in Europe’s air, with much of that coming from residential wood-burning. Air pollution kills around 500,000 people in the EU each year, or over 1,000 every day. Across the continent, citizens are coming together to demand action for cleaner air. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the issue even more sharply into focus, as air pollution worsens COVID’s impacts.

Burning wood has no place in Europe’s energy mix, and should not be bleeding away subsidies that must support truly clean technologies like wind and solar.

Our living heritage: A home for precious biodiversity

Natural forests are beautiful, complex ecosystems that teem with life. They build soil carbon, cool the air, control flooding, help pollinate crops and regulate water cycles. Forests are invaluable to humans and plants and animals alike.

But the EU’s forests are under siege. The EU’s own scientists warn that Europe’s forest ecosystems are crashing, and heavy exploitation for wood fuel is partly to blame. Less than 15% of the forests set aside for conservation are in good condition, and the amount of undisturbed forest decreased by 42% between 2015 and 2020. Industrial forests are a poor replacement for natural forest: dappled woodland becomes a regimented monoculture of single-species plantations; birdsong becomes silence.

We can change this: Let’s correct the mistake in our laws

The EU needs to reform its renewable energy policies to kick its dependence on wood-burning for energy. This year, policymakers can fix this mistake. The European Commission has re-opened RED II for reform, providing an opportunity to remove forest biomass from the list of renewable energy sources. Environmental organisations across Europe are calling on policymakers to act fast. Reducing the fuel-harvesting pressure on forests will mean governments can meet their renewable energy targets by supporting truly zero-emissions energy sources like wind and solar, and forests can be restored to better preserve biodiversity and save the climate.

Burning forest biomass for energy drives climate change, destroys critically important habitats and pollutes our air. Weak “sustainability” criteria for logging and replanting schemes simply can’t solve this triple challenge. We need to protect and restore our forests, not burn them for fuel. Let’s rewrite RED II, leave the forests to do their work and get our energy elsewhere.