

Japan-South Korea NGO Statement on Biomass

October 21, 2021

To Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio
President Moon Jae-in

CC HAGIUDA Koichii, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI)
AMOU Takashi, Director General of Forestry Agency
Moon Sung-wook, Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE)
Choi Byeong-Am, Minister of Korea Forest Service (KFS)

We the undersigned environmental organizations in Japan and South Korea want to praise the leadership of both countries for recent commitments to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. We strongly support this transition to a low-carbon society powered by clean, renewable sources of energy.

That said, as you work to implement policies to achieve national net-zero emission goals, we urge you to ensure that renewable energy policies protect forests (including natural and replanted) and do not worsen climate change. Forests provide habitat for countless animal and plant species that are essential for supporting biodiversity. Existing forests are crucial stores of carbon as trees continually absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and lock it away for their lifetimes.

Scientists warn that the use of wood as bioenergy (forest biomass) increases near-term atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide because when it is burned, the carbon in the wood is quickly returned to the atmosphere.¹ Even if there is no deforestation and trees regrow, the time this takes means increased carbon emissions for at least the next few decades. This is the critical period we have to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions and prevent dangerous warming given the remaining carbon budget estimated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

It is a scientific fact that carbon dioxide emissions from the combustion of wood are greater than those from coal per unit of energy, and the use of wood biomass for power generation alone is extremely inefficient. For these reasons it is a climate change policy mistake to subsidize electricity produced from biomass as carbon-neutral renewable energy. Our renewable energy policies should not worsen the climate crisis.

We are alarmed at the scale of the increase of demand for forest biomass from current renewable energy incentives. This increase is leading to the additional harvesting of wood for biomass at home and abroad.

- In South Korea, bioenergy amounts to 40 percent of the renewable energy production, consequently, electricity from biomass increased more than 75 percent annually from 2012 to 2019. Korea imports more than 3 million tons of wood pellets from Vietnam,

¹ Letter Regarding Use of Forests for Bioenergy, February 11, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3DrOxQR>

Malaysia, Indonesia, and Canada per year and has seen a 4-fold growth in domestic production between 2015 and 2020. Total demand of wood pellets is projected to increase to 8 million tons per year.

As forests everywhere are valuable stores of carbon and continue its sequestration as trees grow older, we are deeply concerned about policy proposals to replace imported biomass with domestic ones. Expanding domestic biomass will only endanger our forest ecosystems through more intensive and unsustainable logging practices, let alone addressing its impacts on the climate. Especially as climate change brings more severe rainfall to our region, inappropriate logging on forested hillsides can put communities at risk of catastrophic landslides.

- In Japan, the government had initially supported small-scale biomass power generation using locally-sourced wood. However, the 2011 feed-in-tariff has resulted in the construction of many new large-scale biomass power plants that are overwhelmingly fueled by imported wood pellets and chips. Imports of wood pellets increased from 72,000 tons per year in 2012 to more than 2 million tons per year in 2020, and are projected to continue to increase.

Additionally, rules under the Energy Conservation Act encourage older and less efficient coal-fired power plants to replace a portion of coal burned with biomass (biomass co-firing) which results in even greater demand for imported biomass.

We are concerned that the tremendous amount of new demand from Japan and South Korea is having negative impacts on forests from Vietnam and Southeast Asian countries to the last old-growth and primary forests in Canada, the southeastern United States, and beyond.

For this reason, the undersigned organizations urge you, President Moon and Prime Minister Kishida, to announce the following reforms to protect forests before the next United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26):

1. Require all types of renewable energy contribute to near-term emissions reductions throughout their lifecycle consistent with the Paris Agreement 1.5-degree pathways
2. Immediately suspend the construction and operation of new electricity-only woody biomass power plants
3. Introduce a set of comprehensive environmental standards for biomass power, and ensure compliance of all existing woody biomass power plants with:
 - a) reporting of lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions
 - b) stringent greenhouse gas emissions limits aligned with the Paris Agreement goals and achieving carbon neutrality by 2050
 - c) sustainability criteria for woody biomass fuels, and
 - d) cascading use of woody biomass energy
4. Show strong political commitments on forests and land-use at the COP26 World Leaders Summit, and strive to achieve the New York Declaration on Forests goal to halt

deforestation by 2030

Sincerely,

Japan

Biomass Industrial Society Network, Chairman Miyuki Tomari

Fridays for Future Sendai

Global Environmental Forum

Hutan Group

Japan Tropical Forest Action Network

Mighty Earth

Plantation Watch

South Korea

Korea Federation for Environmental Movements

Green Environment Youth Korea

Green Korea United

Greenpeace Seoul Office

Solutions for Our Climate