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The science of forest biomass: Conflicting studies map the controversy

by Justin Catanoso on 12 July 2021

- *A major political and environmental dispute is heating up as the forestry industry and governments promote forest biomass — cutting trees, turning them into wood pellets, and burning them to make electricity. They claim the science shows biomass to be sustainable, with the energy produced resulting in zero emissions.*
- *Forest advocates and many researchers sit squarely on the other side of the argument, providing evidence that forest biomass is destructive to forests and biodiversity, is dirtier than coal, and destabilizing for the climate. Moreover, they say, the carbon neutrality claim is an error that will greatly increase carbon emissions.*
- *These diverging viewpoints are colliding this week as the European Commission wrangles with revisions to its legally binding Renewable Energy Directive (REDII), with recommendations to the European parliament due this Wednesday, July 14, Analysts say the EU rules counting biomass as carbon neutral are unlikely to change.*
- *In this exclusive story, Mongabay provides a review of the science on both sides of the forest biomass debate, summarizing key studies and reports, and providing links to these primary sources to help readers decide for themselves.*

In a rare interview in December 2019, the CEO of the world's largest company that burns woody biomass to generate electricity stressed how his immense wood pellet-fired power plant — United Kingdom-based Drax — is good for forests.

“I have a very, very clear view of this,” Will Gardiner [told Mongabay](#) at the United Nations climate summit in Madrid (COP25). “It is absolutely better to use biomass than coal. The wood pellets we use come from forest ecosystems that are regrown.

“Fundamentally, we are part of a system that is helping forests to grow and prosper. A mature forest ends up bouncing off, and doesn't capture more carbon. A managed forest that keeps growing continues to capture more carbon,” he said.



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Gardiner's view is essential to the booming forest biomass industry which [positions itself](#) as a vital part of the solution to the climate change crisis. His claims are also meant to counter forest advocates who decry the outsized negative impacts they say wood pellet production and burning is having on global forests, biodiversity, the climate and efforts to curb carbon emissions.

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