

FOREST WATCH SPECIAL REPORT

Renewable biomass slips further away as Commission gets its timing wrong

Despite disappointment in 2008 about the 10 per cent renewable energy target for transport as part of the Renewable Energy Directive,¹ there has been hope that biomass policies might appear in a more favourable light. However the situation today appears grim. There is presently not only a lack of data, but inconsistent coordination between the European Commission and Member States meaning it seems unlikely that decision makers will adopt biomass policies that contribute to halting climate change or improving forest management.

In December 2009, the European Commission is expected to release a report on 'sustainability criteria' for biomass (other than biofuels and bioliquids) within the framework of the adopted Renewable Energy Directive. If appropriate, this report will also include a proposal that could take the form of recommendations, guidelines or a legislative amendment to the Renewable Energy Directive, which already contains sustainability criteria for biofuel and bioliquids, but not for biomass.

Biomass will be an important part of the 20 per cent of the EU's energy consumption that, according to the Directive, must come from renewable sources, by 2020. In 2005, only six per cent of the EU's total energy consumption was from renewable energy; 60 per cent of renewable energy production came from biomass, and the majority of biomass came from wood or wood based products. The target of 20 per cent renewable energy by 2020 will therefore potentially have a large impact on the EU's forests and beyond, as will the 'sustainability criteria' to be adopted by the Commission and/or the Member States.

While the Commission is developing its ideas about what sustainability criteria for biomass should look like, Member States will soon start producing National Renewable Energy Action Plans (REAP), which must be submitted to the European Commission by June 2010. Amongst other things, these plans will indicate how existing biomass resources are to be developed and how new biomass resources can be mobilised to meet the 2020 target.

NGOs who have been following this issue find this timing extremely confusing. If the European Commission comes with a legislative proposal at the end of this year, it means that Member States will have prepared their REAPs, including a biomass component, before the biomass sustainability criteria have been adopted, and possibly before they have even been discussed by the Commission, Parliament and/or Member States.

To find out how Member States should deal with this problem, Belgian MEP Bart Staes² asked a question to the European Commission who responded that "the report at the end of 2009 could propose additional legislative action or give recommendations for action at national or local level to be taken into account when preparing the REAPs."³ This is clearly unhelpful as it is not clear how Member States can take a yet-to-be-made legislative proposal or recommendations into account in action plans that should be being discussed soon as they are due for mid 2010.

One of the biggest problems with the present timing is that without having clarified and agreed among Commission, Parliament, Member States and civil society actors what qualifies as 'sustainable biomass', Member States cannot start analysing their potential of sustainable biomass resources. In the reply to the parliamentary question, the Commission also stated that "when preparing their national REAPs, Member States should observe the minimum criteria agreed for the sustainable use of biofuels." This is clearly bad advice: the current sustainability criteria for biofuels do not include social aspects, requirements regarding forest management (including its effect on the greenhouse gas balance), or how to maximise end-use efficiency of biomass in heating or electricity applications. This means that the criteria are not applicable to biomass, much of which will have to come from forest and timber products.

Furthermore, the European Commission has not come up with a clear strategy on how to prevent Member States from counting the same biomass for different uses twice. In their Renewable Energy Action Plans, Member States must assess both domestically available biomass resources and their need for imports, yet, according to the reply from the European Commission, the Member States only need to indicate "possible import countries". In other words, they do not need to prove that these countries will actually be able to provide the amount of biomass required, let alone that this biomass will be sustainably sourced.

The European Commission stated that it will assess data supplied by the Member States based on past figures from Eurostat and on future projections from various sources. Currently, there is disagreement about what constitutes a forest, let alone forest area and land use. Without clear definitions, data and monitoring systems, estimations of biomass availability – let alone sustainable biomass – will remain a wild guess.

Endnotes

1. Directive 2009/28/EC on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable energy sources, published on 5.6.2009
2. Written question by Bart Staes (Verts/ALE) to the Commission on Sustainability criteria for biomass <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+WQ+P-2009-3158+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>
3. Answer given by Mr Piebalgs on behalf of the Commission (P-3158/09EN) <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getAllAnswers.do?reference=P-2009-3158&language=EN>