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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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European Commission grants Drax a license to destroy forests at public's expense

Brussels, December 19 - The UK's biggest power station Drax can continue destroying forests and releasing greenhouse gas emissions at the taxpayer's expense, after the European Commission today approved millions of pounds of additional UK renewable energy subsidies to the energy company for burning wood instead of coal.

The news comes less than three weeks after the Commission [announced its renewable energy proposal](#), which could cause an increase in the EU's bioenergy consumption without proper sustainability safeguards, despite overwhelming evidence that this will damage the climate and destroy forests.

In January 2016, the European Commission [launched](#) an investigation into whether the UK government's financial support for [Drax](#) to convert part of its coal power plant to operate on biomass breaches the European Union's rules on state aid.

Drax supplies about [8 per cent](#) of the UK's electricity and has already converted three of its six generating units to burn woody biomass in place of coal. Today's decision will allow Drax to significantly increase the subsidies for continuing to burn wood pellets in one of these units.

In 2015 Drax received UK government subsidies of more than [£1 million](#) a day for burning almost 6 million tonnes of wood pellets. Today's decision means the UK will fund the burning of an extra 2.4 million tonnes of wood pellets for approximately [£1.5 million](#) a day – with devastating environmental consequences.

“The European Commission's decision is a grave error. By approving UK government subsidies for Drax, the Commission has effectively issued a license for the continued devastation of US forests and increasing carbon pollution. With this decision, the Commission goes directly against its own proposal to cancel biomass burning in electricity-only installations,” said Linde Zuidema, bioenergy campaigner at **Fern**, the forests and rights NGO.

Today's press release from the Commission stated: [“The project will receive the support until 2027 and, according to UK estimates, will generate about 3.6 Terawatt hours \(TWh\) of](#)

[electricity per year. The plant is due to use approximately 2.4 million tonnes of wood pellets per year, mainly sourced from the United States and South America.](#)”

In March 2016, a coalition of NGOs - Fern, Biofuel Watch, Dogwood Alliance, Birdlife International, European Environmental Bureau, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Southern Environmental Law Centre - [submitted detailed comments](#) to the Commission outlining the dangers posed by allowing Drax's subsidies.

For a number of years [scientists](#), [NGOs](#), the [media](#) and others have all highlighted how Drax's switch from burning coal to burning biomass in order to achieve EU clean energy targets and prevent global warming is achieving the opposite, and has driven the destruction of forests in the South Eastern United States.

- **Increased emissions.** Power stations that burn wood emit more carbon per unit of electricity generated than coal-fired stations. EU policies assume that the emissions will be offset by future growth of trees, but this assumption – as was [acknowledged by the Commission](#) recently – is not generally valid. The New Scientist recently described wood-fired electricity as [“the great carbon scam.”](#)

- **Forest destruction in the US.** While consuming 60 per cent of the US total wood pellet export, Drax's voracious demand for biomass is causing immense damage in forests in the Southeast US states of Virginia, North and South Carolina, where forests are being logged at [four times](#) the rate of South America's rainforests. The European Commission's [own investigation](#) found that using biomass from the Southeast US threatens biodiversity, and can cause deforestation and forest degradation, with the risk of increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

Responses from US-based environmental organisations

“The cheapest way for the United Kingdom to keep the lights on and to cut carbon at the same time is through wind and solar – not biomass.

“Biomass power is dirty. It worsens climate change. And it costs more than wind and solar. So why subsidize it? It makes no sense. It's time for policymakers to recognize that there are cheaper, cleaner options for meeting the UK's energy needs,” said Debbie Hammel, Director of the Land Markets Initiative at the **Natural Resources Defense Council**.

“Drax's biomass operations and the supporting EU subsidies, have spelled disaster to the forests and communities of the Southern United States. In addition to peer-reviewed science which clearly shows that industrial scale biomass is a false solution to climate change, this industry continues to negatively impact the health of local communities while degrading the abilities of their forests to protect homes and businesses from natural disasters,” said Adam Macon, Campaign Director at **Dogwood Alliance**.

“The science is clear- burning trees for electricity increases rather than decreases carbon in the atmosphere. Subsidizing a 19th century technology that puts more CO2 into the air is

directly contrary to the EU commitments made in The Paris Climate Accord” said David Carr, general counsel of the **Southern Environmental Law Center**.

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