

Letter to the Editor of *The Economist*

Dear Editor

I was surprised to read in last week's Briefing, 'Negative Emissions', your upbeat assessment of burning woodchips at Drax power station, lauding it as a solution to growing CO² emissions. Fuelled by generous subsidies and exemptions from carbon emissions accounting, won by forestry industry lobbying, biomass is a rapidly expanding electricity generation fuel in Europe and North America. However, burning biomass for electricity generation can never be a solution to the rise in carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere; in fact it is a serious new threat.

This is because burning woodchips releases 50 per cent more CO² than burning thermal coal of the same calorific value (see PFPI report, attached). Furthermore, living trees actively absorb CO² from the atmosphere, so when we cut down trees for electricity generation we lose twice over. We have calculated that ceasing loss-making logging of the 400,000 hectare public native forest estate in south eastern New South Wales alone would save about 2 million tonnes of CO² emissions per annum (<http://www.tai.org.au/content/logging-or-carbon-credits>).

Your Briefing is initially bullish about the prospects for carbon capture and storage, but then admits this technology is being used virtually nowhere, except where mandated by government, as in Australia's Bass Strait gas fields, because it very expensive. The article accepts it will not be widely adopted without much higher prices on CO² emissions than currently exist. Hence this CO² stays in the atmosphere.

Finally, the article erroneously claims wood chips for electricity generation come only from sawmill residue. In fact, in recent years the Australian forestry industry has actively sought and now gained subsidies to chip millions of mature trees in publicly owned native forests to export to European biomass electricity generators. The industry is also promoting new biomass fuelled electricity generation in Australia. This is only feasible with significant subsidies. Many of these forestry firms, which currently export woodchips to Japan and China for cardboard manufacture, are on the edge of bankruptcy, despite the large public subsidies they have received over the past 50 years. They see these Australian and European subsidies and non-counting of CO² emissions from biomass burning as a lifeline for their dying industry. Hence, the rapid growth of biomass generation, exemplified at Drax, is significantly contributing to the logging of CO² absorbing forests, not only in Europe, but worldwide.

Along with land clearing for agriculture and urban development, the chip millers' destruction of native forests also is the major cause of the extinction crisis of Australian arboreal mammals, including the koala. Increasingly competitive renewable energies like wind and solar power, which release no CO² and do not rely on financially unviable carbon capture technologies, must always be the energy source of choice.

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