

Romania's Forests Under Threat

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Burning our bridge to the future

Contrary to being clean and green, almost two-thirds of Romania's so-called 'renewable energy' comes from the logging and burning of wood from forests

When one thinks of "renewable" energy sources, images of solar panels on roof tops and wind farms on cropland usually spring to mind. In Romania, a country with relatively low population density, massive amounts of farmland and plenty of sunshine (approximately 210 sunny days per year, to be precise), one would be forgiven for assuming that the sun and the wind provide the vast majority of the country's renewable energy.

Sadly, this assumption is wrong.

Almost two-thirds of Romania's so-called renewable energy comes from the burning of wood sourced from forests. The vast majority of this is for heat generation. Whilst the use of wood to heat houses in Romania has occurred for centuries, there is nothing 'climate friendly' about burning wood now that we only have a few decades to revolutionise how we use and produce energy in order to avoid the worst impacts of the climate crisis. A simple truth is inconvenient to the EU's current consideration that burning forest biomass is on a par with solar, wind and heat pumps in its renewable energy policies and specifically within the Renewable Energy Directive:

- It takes decades to centuries to recapture the carbon stored in wood when wood is burned and after that stored carbon is instantaneously combusted and released to the atmosphere. Carbon also continues to be lost from soils up to decades after a forest is logged.
- To reach the EU's Climate Targets, not only do we need to stop burning fossil fuels, we need to massively increase the amount of carbon stored and taken up in natural forests. This is a non-negotiable part of meeting climate goals set out in the Paris Agreement, and therefore, of EU climate commitments. Burning wood does the opposite. It reduces the amount of carbon stored in our forests and adds

more carbon into the atmosphere. It is therefore non-sensical to simply consider burning wood eligible under the Renewable Energy Directive, especially since such eligibility then allows for member states to subsidise and incentivise the burning of forest biomass.

The Joint Research Centre, the EU's science and knowledge service, recently published a report on the use of forest biomass in the EU. It found that for almost all the scenarios it assessed (23 from 24) burning forest wood is a 'lose-lose' pathway for climate and biodiversity protection. Even for the one scenario of the burning of 'fine woody debris' (twigs and sticks), emissions would be higher than burning fossil fuels for as long as twenty years. In Romania, it is mainly whole trees that are logged and burned for energy - this is clearly a 'lose-lose' scenario for both climate and biodiversity. This leads to a logical next question: If burning wood is bad for the climate, why does it take up such a massive share of Romania's renewable energy production?

Below: A brutal incision in Fagaras Natura 2000 site

This road was built with EU funds to access forests to cut wood and burn for energy production.

Photo: Agent Green



Although cutting wood for local energy production is a key driver of logging, the export commodity market is also a major contributor to forest degradation in Romania. According to FutureMetrics (a consultancy firm in the wood pellet sector), Romania exports wood pellets to at least 16 other countries, including Austria, Bulgaria, Italy and Greece. It is difficult to determine exactly where pellets are sourced from and whether they have been produced from primary forest biomass or from residual sawmill wood, but the fact that they are being exported means there is a commodity market that will only continue to drive demand for more pellets in Romania. This demand for energy production means more pressure, not less, will be brought to bare on Romania's forests.

Significantly, the demand for energy from wood in Romania is a key driver of illegal logging. In January 2021, Romania's Competition Council handed out massive fines to timber companies for illegal market collusion in the Romanian forestry sector. These companies are involved in the production of pellets for energy. The Competition Council media release noted the link between using forest wood for generating energy and illegal logging: "The Competition Council recommended to the Romanian Government the realization (including with a source of financing from European funds) of a program on saving firewood, by replacing the inefficient and polluting devices used by the population for heating, with more efficient ones, which would lead to lower costs and significant reduction in the demand for firewood, a key aspect in reducing illegal logging."

With Romania burning more wood for energy than it uses to make wood products (according to the JRC, in 2016, 65% of

wood was burned), the use of forests for energy is clearly a huge driver of the logging of the last primary and old-growth forests of the EU.

"Trees are more valuable alive than dead both for climate and for biodiversity. To meet future net zero emission goals, your governments should work to preserve and restore forests and not to burn them."

Letter from 500 scientists to world leaders including EU President Ursula von der Leyen

The EU has a new plan to build a circular economy. Burning wood is the last thing one should do if you wish to build a real circular economy. Once something has been burned, it cannot be re-used. The cycle of the cascading use of wood, where wood that is cut is

used for long term products and then recycled, is broken by burning forest biomass.

In Romania, the lack of cohesion in EU climate and biodiversity policy could not be clearer. On the one hand, the Biodiversity Strategy says we need to protect forests as their condition continues to decline and forests are a key 'ally in the fight against climate change'. On the other hand, the Renewable Energy Directive promotes the burning of forest biomass as a 'renewable' fuel. For the sake of Romania's forests, these policies need cohesion and the EU must stop promoting forest biomass as renewable energy.

Below: Old trees lined up in Romanian timber mill that produces enormous amounts of pellets to be burned for energy. Photo: Matthias Schickhofer



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