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Renewable energy sources and biomass A threat or an opportunity to the woodworking industries?

CEI-Bois position paper

In the fight against the consequences of climate change and with the aim of fulfilling international commitments, European and EU Member States authorities rely ever more on renewable energy sources and, in particular, biomass for energetic purposes.

One of the most prominent and readily available fractions of biomass is wood, the basic raw material of the European woodworking industries.

These industries have been and continue playing a central role in the valorisation of wood raw material, producing a wide range of wood and wood-based products for a variety of applications. The use of wood has many advantages for man and the environment, such as storing carbon over long periods of time and providing solutions through the substitution of other, energy intensive materials.

The development and promotion of wood as a renewable source of energy has had and is having an impact on the raw material supply, operation and profitability of the forest-based sector and woodworking industries. The impact is, however, not the same at all levels and may differ strongly between the different subsectors of the woodworking industries, partly due to regional differences and varying framework conditions.

Whereas initiatives taken to promote RES have provided new business opportunities and improved profitability in certain sectors and have led to an optimised use and valorisation of the raw material wood, they are having an impact on the raw material supply to industry too.

Traditionally, most sawmill by-products e.g. found their way to the wood-based panel and pulp/paper sector. These subsectors in particular now face a strong competition with the energy producing sector, looking for carbon neutral fuel.

The interest of the energy sector in woody biomass was not only fuelled by its carbon neutrality, but in many cases also by subsidies granted in various forms to start using more renewable energy sources. The latter has created a situation whereby different (industry) sectors started competing for the same type of raw material, but with different means. Furthermore, this competition affects not only fresh wood assortments, but also extends to wood from recycling or demolition.

Therefore, the European woodworking industries, represented by CEI-Bois aisbl, insist that authorities would take the necessary measures to avoid that initiatives taken to promote the use of renewable energy sources would negatively impact the positive contribution from wood and the woodworking sector.

In particular, policies installed to promote renewable energy sources must not lead to

- increased prices for wood raw material;
- a diversion of suitable wood sortments directly to energy production;
- a limitation to the supply of by-products to other actors in the wood value chain.

CEI-Bois therefore requests authorities to:

- Develop actions to foster the sustainable expansion and use of forests and plantations at European and worldwide level with a view to making more wood available for the production of carbon storing wood-based products as well as for the production of renewable energy. This shall include support for activities regarding efficient recovery of forest residues; for development of short rotation forestry and biomass energy crops ; for establishing efficient logistic systems for the transport and distribution of biomass and support for implementation of programmes conceived to exploit the large potential of still unused biomass in an economical and sustainable way;
- Foster the recycling of wood by-products and residues and therefore support collecting, sorting and cleaning technologies and improve waste regulations and related research;
- Recognise the superior eco-efficiency of wood-based products versus other materials and their supreme properties for repairing and recycling with minimal energy use;
- Ensure that subventions to energy installations using woody biomass do not lead to a distortion of raw material markets;
- Recognise increased use of wood-based products as carbon sink under the Kyoto Protocol, thereby formally acknowledging the positive contribution of wood-based products to climate change mitigation;
- Respect the value chain of wood and wood-based products. To achieve this, it is essential that, before taking decisions on measures to increase the use of wood for energy production, the wood-based industries are always involved as the competent key partner. This will ensure an optimal mobilisation of wood taking account of the specific regional situation.

Sustainability criteria for biomass

In the context of the the Directive for the promotion of energy from renewable sources [RES Directive] the European Commission has published, in February 2010, a report on sustainability criteria of solid biomass [COM(2010)11].

In this report the EC states that it does not see a need to introduce binding sustainability criteria and list of a number of basic requirements Member States should apply.

For the European woodworking industries there can be no compromises over this issue. Biomass derived from forests has to comply with the same sustainability requirements as those required for (industry) wood. CEI-Bois considers that the Ministerial Conference on the Protection of Forests in Europe, MCPFE, provides for a good framework for this.

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