

## 8. A good idea that's nonetheless banned: old pallets as biomass

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In March, the big energy companies and various Dutch environmental organisations signed the Biomass Sustainability Agreement (Convenant Duurzaamheid Biomassa). The goal is to bring about sustainable energy production. According to the agreement, the growth of renewable energy will be achieved by burning biomass in coal-fired power stations, amongst other things. That's a good idea, since unlike burning coal or natural gas, burning wood is carbon neutral.

Growing trees take carbon dioxide out of the air. This carbon dioxide is released again when the wood is burnt, just as when it decays to humus in the forest. Wood is a particularly sustainable fuel provided it is burned correctly: the temperature shouldn't be too low and there should be an adequate supply of air.

However, there are conditions attached to the combustion of that biomass in the Agreement, such as: the biomass must come from sustainably managed forests. Specific reference is thereby made to FSC wood or equivalent certification systems. FSC wood originates from tropical forests. Most 'approved' forests in the world are PEFC certified. There's a long way to go until 100% of the forests worldwide are certified. At the moment that figure is just 10%.

The agreement refers to a stimulation programme aimed at enabling more small woodland owners in North America to obtain FSC certification. Those drafting the agreement assume that North America is an important supply source for biomass for the Netherlands.

But what's wrong with European wood?

It would be much better if we were to set this goal closer to home. 47% of forests in Europe are currently certified. Let's raise that percentage first before we start providing woodlands in America with financial support to achieve certification.

And there are more bureaucratic obstacles. Hence it's not feasible to certify the trees alongside the road in the Netherlands for sustainable forestry management. Therefore, this wood could not be used for sustainable combustion in future, despite the fact that it's very suitable for it.

Another - and perhaps the largest - 'problem' that we encounter is used wood. 95% of wood products (not including paper and cardboard) consist of wooden pallets. Around half a billion new single-use pallets are produced every year in Europe. That's around 23 million cubic metres of wood per year. These pallets are used a number of times and repaired and ultimately shredded into wood chips which are highly suitable for combustion in biomass power stations.

But it's not possible to tell whether used pallets have been produced from PEFC or FSC certified wood. Therefore, they are excluded from biomass combustion. This really is a missed opportunity. According to Lansink's Ladder - a standard for waste management - that would also be a better use of a raw material: the product is first reused as much as possible, then it's recycled (repair) and when there really is no other option it's used to generate sustainable energy.

The ambition of the Biomass Sustainability Agreement is for 100% of the biomass to be FSC or equivalent certified by 2020. Striving for sustainable energy is good, but the execution is overlooking the sensible, obvious solutions.

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