

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Biomass sustainability'

(2011/C 104/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- believes that producers and operators must be supported at all levels of governance by administrative and fiscal policies that are progressive and consistent, enabling the sector to plan strategically and with confidence;
- suggests that protocols on biomass sustainability should be integral to the provisions of relevant international trade agreements and believes that international agreement on improved and standardised land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) accounting must be a priority;
- encourages more authorities to sign up to the Covenant of Mayors (or similar national or regional collaborations) and otherwise would recommend all authorities to adopt formal policies and practices that champion sustainable energies, including where appropriate, incentivising the local production and use of biomass;
- considers that the Commission Report on biomass sustainability due in 2011 should be accompanied by proposals for binding minimum sustainability criteria for the use of solid and gaseous biomass sources in electricity, heating and cooling, including a greenhouse gas saving requirement taking into account indirect land use change impacts where applicable, and an assessment of the impact of biomass production on food production, on forestry and wood industries and on other effects of land use change.

Rapporteur:	Mr Brian Meaney (IE/EA), Clare County Council and Mid-West Regional Authority
Reference document:	Report from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on sustainability requirements for the use of solid and gaseous biomass sources in electricity, heating and cooling COM(2010) 11 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Introduction

1. believes that the sustainable production and use of biomass can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, increase the security of energy supply, promote technology development, increase employment opportunities and contribute to local and regional enterprise and development;

2. acknowledges that the targets set for renewable energies in general and for biomass in particular, at about 10 % of total energy use by 2020, under the Renewable Energy Road Map, will put pressure on both EU-producers and importers of biomass to reach these targets; will increase pressure on food and forestry production, on alternative uses for land and materials and impact on biodiversity;

3. underlines the importance of sustainability in the production and use of biomass and notes the Commission initiative to introduce non-binding criteria for the use of biomass in electricity, heating and cooling supplementing binding sustainability criteria for biofuels; however, given that the biomass sector is at the point of potentially rapid growth, considers that the approach proposed needs to be kept under close review;

4. welcomes the Commission Report, in proposing non-binding criteria, as a first step, but considers it necessary to work as quickly as possible towards the development of both EU-wide and hopefully wider binding international sustainability criteria, for the production and use of biomass;

5. agrees that the principles that underpin any sustainability scheme must be effective, cost-efficient and consistent with existing policy, and take account of biodiversity and agricultural production of food for human consumption;

6. considers that the European Commission initiative is appropriate in terms of the application of the subsidiarity and proportionality principles;

7. is concerned that as many elements of biomass production and utilisation are innovative, capital-intensive and require relatively long lead-in times; and particularly given the

current economic challenges, believes that producers and operators must be supported at all levels of governance by administrative and fiscal policies that are progressive and consistent, enabling the sector to plan strategically and with confidence;

Sustainability issues for solid and gaseous biomass in electricity, heating and cooling

8. although biomass is a rapidly developing sector, is nevertheless concerned at the absence of up-to-date information on the production and use of biomass. Particularly, given the increasing levels of biomass imports, the Committee believes that it is problematic to establish policies without reliable, comprehensive and up-to-date supporting data alongside appropriate safeguards for biodiversity, local communities and indigenous peoples rights and consideration of full climate impact, including displacement effects;

9. believes that sustainability must be intrinsic to the development of the biomass sector and EU policy should focus particularly on promoting the local and regional production and use of biomass. National and sub-national policies to promote sustainable biomass production and use must recognise and reflect the particular characteristics and features of their localities and regions;

10. considers that account should be taken of the positive impact of the use of forest biomass in the prevention of forest fires in the context of sustainable forest management, including in protected areas and areas of great biodiversity;

11. recalls that cascading use, i.e. when biomass is used for material products first and the energy content is safely recovered from the end-of-life products, tends to provide a higher environmental benefit than primary use as fuel;

12. is concerned that if the demand for non-food biomass, especially fuel crops and its derivatives, continues to grow, this will inevitably lead to an expansion of global arable land at the expense of natural ecosystems such as savannas and tropical rain forests, and therefore the current aspirations to increase the use of non-food biomass are intended to counteract climate change and environmental degradation, they are at high risk of problem shifting and leading to a global deterioration of the environment;

13. underlines that while unnecessary red tape must not inhibit the emergence of a potentially very significant industry, in order to give confidence to consumers, sustainability criteria must be verifiable and capable of independent certification; this is particularly relevant for those internationally-traded biomass materials;

14. considers that the same or equivalent sustainability criteria must apply to EU-produced biomass and to biomass material imported into the EU so as to help establish international standards and international markets for sustainably-produced material;

15. suggests that protocols on biomass sustainability should be integral to the provisions of relevant international trade agreements and believes that international agreement on improved and standardised land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) accounting must be a priority;

16. concurs with the proposed extension of the LCA (Life Cycle Assessment) method in the Renewable Energy Directive so that the sustainable and certified conversion of biomass fuel to electricity, heating and cooling is included in the calculation of GHG emissions of biomass;

17. supports the principle of a common energy efficiency policy approach for both fossil and biomass fuels, to avoid a possible switching to fossil fuels should the same efficiency standards not apply;

18. maintains that policies for energy efficiency must not discriminate against the safe energy use of biomass waste streams that have no other use (such as sewage sludge);

Recommendations for appropriate actions to address sustainability issues

19. believes, as a general principle, that there should be consistency in the application of EU legislation to biomass production and use, whether for use in biofuels or for use in electricity, heating and cooling. This would minimise uncertainty and reduce the risk of advantage being taken of legislative discrepancies;

20. where national and regional biomass sustainability criteria may already be in operation or in the process of development, would welcome movement towards a harmonisation of criteria, while respecting local factors;

21. broadly defends the proposal to differentiate support for electricity, heating and cooling installations based on their energy conversion efficiencies; however urges that existing installations being adapted to convert 'new' types of biomass must not be discriminated against in light of their overall energy savings;

22. encourages the development of industrial and on-farm anaerobic digestion and where scale is an issue, would advocate support for cooperative activities; furthermore considers that relevant fertiliser and waste legislation should encourage anaerobic digestion in their categorisation of digestate;

23. considers that given the developing international trade in wood pellets, a priority should be the early obligatory sustainability and quality criteria for this material;

24. considers the pursuance of a sustainable forestry policy as a necessary corollary to achieving biomass sustainability; harnessing biomass for energy purposes has to correspond to cultivating a proportional amount of energy wood;

25. stresses that National Energy Action Plans should include or append data relating to biomass: types and scale of installations, types of biomass, sources of biomass (domestic, imported), Life Cycle Assessments and so on;

26. given the competences and multiple roles of local and regional authorities in energy policy generally and in promotion of sustainable energies in particular; emphasises that sub-national authorities must be intimately involved in the formulation and implementation of such national plans;

27. would encourage more authorities to sign up to the Covenant of Mayors (or similar national or regional collaborations) and otherwise would recommend all authorities to adopt formal policies and practices that champion sustainable energies, including where appropriate, incentivising the local production and use of biomass;

28. in light of the proposed sustainability criteria being limited to larger energy producers of 1MW and above, recommends that the effects of defining this threshold will have to be monitored in the establishment of new industrial plant;

29. believes that consideration should be given to a requirement that large-scale suppliers of biomass to smaller electricity, heating and cooling stations be encompassed by sustainability criteria;

30. considers that the Commission Report on biomass sustainability due in 2011 should:

— seek to present the most recent data on biomass, with imports broken down by biomass type, country of production and whether the material is from a certified sustainable source

— summarise the impacts of current sustainability schemes for biomass being developed in the regions and Member States

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- be accompanied by proposals for binding minimum sustainability criteria for the use of solid and gaseous biomass sources in electricity, heating and cooling, including a greenhouse gas saving requirement taking into account indirect land use change impacts where applicable
 - rather than focus on barriers to trade, it should include an assessment of the impact of biomass production on food production, on forestry and wood industries and on other effects of land use change
 - assess the implications on any report recommendations for local and regional authorities who ultimately may have to implement such recommendations
 - incorporate recommendations on broader best practices in the production and conversion of biomass.

Brussels, 27 January 2011.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Mercedes BRESSO
