

Debate

Europe's Wood Harvesting from the United States

ISSUE: Is it ethical for the European Union to harvest wood from the United States to meet its energy goals?

The European Union (EU) is known for their strict environmental rules and their goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In 2007, the EU's environmental agency set the goal of incorporating renewable energy sources that will account for 20 percent of their overall power by the year 2020. While renewable sources such as wind and solar are being used, many of the EU's power plants run on coal energy, which is holding them back from meeting their goal. As a result, the EU has decided to power their plants with wood instead of coal. Wood is a cleaner fuel source than coal and is said to be renewable because trees can be replanted. However, this creates a significant challenge for the EU. The EU requires that loggers obtain permits before they begin cutting down trees, and there are many restrictions as to where and how many trees can be cut once a permit is obtained. Additionally, the amount of forests in the EU is significantly less than in the United States, and the United States does not have as many logging restrictions.

For these reasons the EU has contracted with logging companies in the southern United States to cut, press, and ship wood pellets. Many in the industry are happy about this new demand, since the closing of paper mills in the area have created unemployment and slowed the local economies. The EU states that they only take small trees and branches from these forests, and only take wood from forests that can easily and successfully be reforested. Furthermore, it is said that newer trees absorb more carbon dioxide than older ones, so once trees have been cut, new trees can be planted, therefore making the process more sustainable.

However, environmentalists are concerned that the scope of the demand will deteriorate the forests. They see it as a short-term solution with long-term consequences. There are not strict controls for cutting, and sometimes older trees constitute some of the material for the pellets. Cutting older trees could defeat the purpose for clean energy as the older trees harbor large amounts of carbon, which is immediately released once it is burned.

Despite assurances, large-scale clear-cutting is taking place in these forests. Because this is a fairly new territory for renewable energy, there are no set guidelines nor is one entity officially held accountable for how the forests are being cut and which parts of the trees are being used to make the pellets. Clear-cutting is mostly illegal in the EU with a few specific exceptions. This brings up another potential criticism: Is the EU being hypocritical in these actions? Critics see the EU as going against their own environmental laws as a means of achieving their energy goals. While they do not want to cut down their forests, it appears acceptable to cut down the forests of other countries. Environmentalists also fear that due to the demand and lack of strict controls, some wetlands and other sensitive areas are being logged. Destruction of the ecosystem, including elimination of species and making the areas more susceptible to flooding, is another concern. On the other hand, the EU states that they act in accordance with the laws established by their government in that the wood must come from forests that are ensured to be reforested, and trees from sensitive areas are not to be cut. Suppliers also maintain that the logging is more sustainable because equipment is restricted to temporary roads so that the land is not disturbed and trees are allowed to grow back naturally.

In 2012, Europe burned 6.7 million tons of wood pellets, and America supplied 1.9 million tons of those pellets. The European consumption of pellets is expected to double by 2020, and the American contribution has been exponentially growing over the past three years. The EU is aware of the challenges between their laws and their practices in the United States, and they are making an effort to analyze the rules and influence the policy. As it stands right now, the power companies and pellet suppliers are responsible for ensuring sustainable practices. As a general rule, suppliers adhere to state-recommended best-management practices, and customers are allowed to investigate operations as a means of control.

There are two sides to every story:

1. It is acceptable for the European Union to harvest American wood because wood is cleaner than coal and the harvesting is done as sustainably as possible.
 2. It is unacceptable for the European Union to harvest American wood because it destroys American forests and will have negative long-term consequences.
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Sources:

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