

DOES BIOMASS MEAN CLEAN, GREEN ENERGY?

By Daniel Beaver

In August last year the Clean Green Energy Company was set up to build and run three 100% wood fired power stations in NSW.

The Clean Green Energy Company said these power stations, would be great for the rural communities in and around Grafton, Bulahdelah, and Moruya, great for the logging industry and great for the environment. A win, win project on all fronts!

They will provide jobs. They will provide another market beside "woodchips" for the "waste" produced by the logging industry and will reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

They are about to be fast tracked for approval by the NSW government. So at great risk to my sanity I braved the propaganda swarm to try to find out what was really going on.

In NSW the state government has facilitated the burning of native forests for electricity by amending the *Electricity Supply Act* in 1999.

Since then Macquarie Generation, one of the nation's largest coal-fired power stations has been conducting a trial using 170,000 tons wood. Recently they reduced their use to around 20,000 tones per year due to a range of problems.

Engineering consultant Peter Barnes says that "Burning wood is an extremely inefficient way of producing electricity. Wood has a high water content, it produces water vapor as it burns, this absorbs a significant amount of heat. So you have to burn a hell of a lot more wood to produce the same amount of power as say coal, or gas."

"If you're building a coal, oil, or gas power station which will produce many thousands of mega watts of electricity you can afford to incorporate a variety of technologies which greatly increase the efficiency of the operation. Compare this to a 100% wood fired power station, with a total energy production capacity of only 30 mega watts per year. You just can't justify the cost of installing the kind of equipment necessary to produce electricity efficiently from a combustion process."

At the end of last year the commonwealth government got in on the act too passing the *Renewable Energy (Electricity) Bill 2000*.

The intent of the bill is to ensure an additional 2% of Australia's energy is produced from renewable sources by 2010. It will provide subsidies to companies investing in "renewable

energy," including biomass.

Biomass, as a term, simply refers to the process of producing electricity from burning organic matter (living things).

Interestingly the entire 2% target could be achieved by burning native forests, leaving new investment in genuine renewable energy sources like solar and wind out of the picture.

Immediately following the act over a dozen new proposals sprung up in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. One of the NSW projects has just received a one million dollar grant from the NSW government.

The 100% wood fired power stations proposed by the clean green energy company will each consume 280 000 tones of wood (trees) each year and produce 5 times as much carbon dioxide as a coal fired power station producing the same amount of energy.

This 280 000 tons will come from "*waste from sustainably managed native forests.*"

However the NSW logging industry fails to comply with the expert scientific committees recommendations for ecologically sustainable forest management.

Indeed, according to the best available scientific data 77 different animal species are expected to become extinct on the North Coast alone, due to over logging and ongoing habitat destruction.

These animals include:

NOCTURNAL BIRDS:

Barking Owl,
Bush Stone-curlew,
Masked Owl,
Powerful Owl,

Superb Fruit-Dove,
Superb Lyrebird
(edwardsii),
Swift Parrot,
Turquoise Parrot,
White-eared Monarch.

DIURNAL BIRDS:

Albert's Lyrebird,
Black-breasted Button-quail,
Black-necked Stork,
Brush Bronzewing,
Double-eyed Fig-Parrot,
Eastern Bristlebird,
Forest Kingfisher,
Hooded Robin,
Mangrove Honeyeater,
Musk Lorikeet,
Olive Whistler,
Osprey,
Pacific Baza,
Painted Honeyeater,
Red Goshawk,
Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo,
Regent Honeyeater,
Rufous Scrub-bird,
Square-tailed Kite,

ARBOREAL MAMMALS:

Squirrel Glider,
Yellow-bellied Glider

TERRESTRIAL MAMMALS:

Black-striped Wallaby,
Broad-toothed Rat,
Brush-tailed Phascogale,
Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby,
Dingo,
Eastern Chestnut Mouse,
Hastings River Mouse,
Long-nosed Potoroo,
Parma Wallaby,
Red-legged Pademelon,
Rufous Bettong,
Tiger Quoll.

Plus 8 frog species, 10 reptile species, 4 turtles and 13 bats.

The logging industry defines as waste any tree that is too old, too young, or the wrong species to make timber out of.

The forests in NSW have been over cut for so long that almost all the trees left in the forest were either too old to be worth logging a hundred years ago, or are the wrong species, or are still too young. In other words our forests are overflowing with waste.

With the woodchip market in severe decline due to cheaper better quality chips from plantations in South America and South East Asia, the logging industry is in desperately need of a new market to sell "forest waste".

This is because loggers rely on the income they get from selling "waste" trees to make it worth while to scour the forest for the last remaining "good quality" trees. Without a market for "waste" industrial logging as we know it would not be possible.

The next 12 months will decide which direction the Australian energy generation (and hence the Australian logging industry) heads in. Will we continue the path to sustainability? Or will we submit to the logging industry's vision of burning our forests for electricity?

With a federal election pending there is a small window of opportunity to nip this nasty new industry in the bud.

Otherwise it is not inconceivable that in 12 months time when you turn on your lights, you will be burning the home of a threatened species.

Biomass has been endorsed as a statewide student campaign for 2001. To stay up to date with what is happening with this issue contact your environment collective, you'll find them at the SRC.

Or check out

<http://www.colongwilderness.org.au>

