

In some places, including Japan and French Guiana, there are proposals not just to burn wood for electricity but to burn palm or soybean oil. Producing these fuels requires expansion of palm or soybean production that leads to clearing of carbon dense tropical forests and reduction of their important carbon sink, both of which add carbon to the atmosphere.

“Sustainability standards” for forest or vegetable oil management cannot alter these results. Sustainable management is what allows wood harvest to eventually pay back carbon debts but cannot alter these decades or even centuries of increased warming. Similarly, any increased demand for vegetable oil adds to the global pressure to clear more forests already created by rising food demands.

Making countries responsible for emissions from land use changes, although desirable, cannot alone fix laws that treat burning wood as carbon neutral because these national responsibilities do not alter the incentives created by those laws for power plants and factories to burn wood. In the same way, the fact that countries are responsible for emissions from diesel fuel use would not fix a law encouraging trucks to burn more diesel on the flawed theory that diesel is carbon neutral. Both treaties that shape national climate responsibilities and each country’s energy laws that implement them must accurately recognize the climate effects of the activities they encourage.

Your decisions going forward are of great consequences for the world’s forests because if the world supplied just an additional 2% of its energy from wood, it would need to double its commercial wood harvests. There is good evidence that increased bioenergy in Europe has already led to greatly increased forest harvests there. These approaches also create a model that encourages tropical countries to cut more of their forests – as several countries have pledged to do – undermining the goals of globally accepted forest agreements.

To avoid these harms, governments must end subsidies and other incentives that today exist for the burning of wood whether from their forests or others. The European Union needs to stop treating the burning of biomass as carbon neutral in its renewable energy standards and in its emissions trading system. Japan needs to stop subsidizing power plants to burn wood. And the United States needs to avoid treating biomass as carbon neutral or low carbon as the new administration crafts climate rules and creates incentives to reduce global warming.

Trees are more valuable alive than dead both for climate and for biodiversity. To meet future net zero emission goals, your governments should work to preserve and restore forests and not to burn them.

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