



# Europe Is Sacrificing Its Ancient Forests for Energy

Governments bet billions on burning timber for green power. The Times went deep into one of the continent's oldest woodlands to track the hidden cost.

By Sarah Hurtes and Weiji Cai  
Photographs by Andreea Campeanu September 7, 2022

Loggers harvested these trees from a protected forest and stacked them on a muddy path in northern Romania.













None of this is illegal — in fact, it's encouraged by green-energy subsidies. But in reality, burning wood can be dirtier than















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Those subsidies gave rise to a booming market, to the point that wood is now Europe's largest renewable energy source, far ahead of wind and solar.



are being harvested for power. And evidence is mounting that Europe's bet on wood to address climate change has not paid off.

Forests in Finland and Estonia, for example, once seen as key assets for reducing carbon from the air, are now the source of so much logging that government scientists consider them carbon emitters. In Hungary, the government waived conservation rules last month to allow increased logging in old-growth forests.

And while European nations can count wood power toward their clean-energy targets, the E.U. scientific research agency said last year that burning wood released more carbon dioxide than would have been emitted had that energy come from fossil fuels.

"People buy wood pellets thinking they're the sustainable choice, but in reality, they're driving the destruction of Europe's last wild forests," said David Gehl of the Environmental Investigation Agency, a Washington-based advocacy group that has studied wood use in Central Europe.

The industry has become so big that researchers cannot keep track of it. E.U. official research could not identify the source of 120 million metric



of a warming planet against the immediate need for jobs, energy and economic stability. The European Union has been a leader in setting green policies, but it is also racing to find energy sources as Russia throttles back its supply of natural gas.

In documents circulated among lawmakers about the proposed rule change, Latvia warned of a “possible negative impact on investment and businesses.” Denmark argued that these decisions should be left to national governments. A winter without reliable Russian gas looms over the debate.

Scientists have warned of this moment for years.



To have a chance of fighting climate change, countries must reduce the amount of carbon dioxide they release into the air. That will require a shift away from fossil fuels. The European Union has required countries to meet aggressive renewable-energy targets. Wood qualifies as renewable energy, on the logic that trees ultimately grow back.

In 2018, the last time the subsidies came up for a vote, nearly 800 scientists signed a letter urging lawmakers to stop treating logged trees as a green source of energy. While trees can be replanted, it can take generations for a growing forest to reabsorb the carbon dioxide from burned wood.

“Using wood deliberately harvested for burning will increase carbon in the atmosphere and warming for decades to centuries,” the scientists wrote.

One of the authors of that letter, Tim Searchinger, a Princeton environmental science scholar, said European lawmakers were understandably eager to find green energy, but they incorrectly lumped all renewable sources together. “I’m not sure people were thinking much about wood at all when they passed these laws,” he said.







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“We still can increase capacity in Europe in a sustainable way,” she said.

The association opposes cutting subsidies or changing the way clean energy is defined. If the European Union no longer considers energy from burnt wood to be carbon-neutral, it would immediately throw many countries off track to hit renewable-energy targets.

That would have major consequences for countries like Italy, the continent’s largest consumer of wood pellets. More than a third of its renewable energy comes from burning plant material. For years, the Italian government has offered tax deductions to encourage buying pellet stoves.

Similar tax breaks are in place in other countries, along with financial incentives for wood producers. Those incentives could be unlawful if the new proposal comes into force.



The remains of an old tree cut in Ceahlău National Park.

Even if the European Parliament endorses a change, however, the details must be worked out in negotiations with national governments.

The governments of Germany, Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg have signaled support for ending the subsidies. Other countries have stayed largely silent.

While environmental groups are still optimistic, even the most strident supporters of the rule change acknowledge that the Russian energy crisis has made the politics challenging. Natural gas prices have increased tenfold over the past year, and many Europeans fear being unable to afford to heat their homes this winter.

“We need more domestic renewable energy and self-sufficiency, not less,” Antti Kurvinen, the Finnish minister for agriculture and forestry, wrote on Twitter in May. “I will fully promote forest energy.”



Romanian shipment data is from Sept. 1, 2021, to Aug. 31, 2022, compiled by the Environmental Investigation Agency. Shipment routes with incomplete data are not shown. Satellite image in top sequence from Google Earth. Wood pellet export data from Eurostat; only exports of more than 2,000 metric tons are shown.

Audio produced by Kate Winslett.