

Call for Evidence - UK Biomass Strategy

Confor (www.confor.org.uk) is the not-for-profit organisation for the UK's sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses. It has 1,500 member companies, representing the whole forestry and wood supply chain.

Chapter 1: Supply

Question 2: *What is the potential size, location and makeup of the sustainable domestic biomass resource that could be derived from the a) waste, b) forestry, c) agricultural sectors, and d) from any other sources (including novel biomass feedstocks, such as algae) in the UK? How might this change as we reach 2050?*

Answer:

It is important to note that the existing forestry and wood processing industry utilises forest fibre as a raw material for manufacturing in a way that delivers a high carbon and economic/jobs value.

The *2016 Wood Fibre Availability and Demand in Britain 2013-2035*¹ study provides an overview of the forestry resource that exists for all wood-users. An updated softwood production forecast (to 2045) is expected later this year and Confor is exploring the possibility of updating the 2016 availability and demand report.

The UK Government's England Tree Action Plan (ETAP) outlines the long-term ambition for trees and woodlands. However, it focuses on planting native hardwoods which provide very little fibre supply for biomass, and then only over much longer timeframes than conifers (typically twice as long, and almost certainly not providing new supply before 2050)² – this limited focus on producing supplies of wood demonstrates a lack of joined up thinking between UK departments. Scotland is having more success in establishing new woodland, with around 50% of that producing future supplies of fibre – with thinnings potentially in 15-20 years.

Biomass in terms of forestry waste residues such as brash or stumps will provide limited additional fibre to the market in the short term.

All public sector forests are certified against the UK Woodland Assurance Standard, along with 23% of private woodlands within the UK – normally the commercially managed sites. There are plans within UKWAS to ban stump harvesting (3.2.3)³. Whole tree harvesting which includes the removal of brash is limited to sites where there will be no negative effects such as soil erosion, soil carbon release, or potential nutrient

¹[CONFOR \(May 2021\): Wood Fibre Availability Demand Report 2016 Final](#)

²[UK Government \(May 2021\): The England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024](#)

³[UKWAS Consultation Draft 2021](#)

deficiency. Currently whole tree harvesting is not widely practiced. Forestry and Land Scotland are currently researching brush removal when very strict site parameters are met. Overall this means that these two sources of fibre are unlikely to provide large scale additional volume. Further research and development is needed in this area to support the potential of this resource.

If developed at scale, short rotation forestry would provide an important supplement to the wood fibre basket.

The UK Government is exploring how to facilitate the greater use of wood in construction, as are the Welsh and Scottish governments. This could include changes to building regulations and involve the use of wood in a range of products including wood fibre insulation and composite board and beam material. Such developments would reduce the fibre available for other uses, such as energy.

Question 5. *How could the production of domestic biomass support rural employment, farm diversification, circular economy, industrial opportunities, and wider environmental benefits? This can include considerations around competition for land, development of infrastructure, skills, jobs, etc.*

Answer:

Forestry and its associated biomass can offer a considerable amount to the rural economy. Many of the benefits are highlighted in the Roots for Further Growth document⁴. In short, the planting and maintenance of woodlands provides jobs, stimulates infrastructure to process timber along with the environment benefits that come with new woodlands. Woodlands capture and store carbon, reduce peak time water movement so reduce flooding events as well as providing a wealth of habitats⁵

Question 6: *What are the main challenges and barriers to increasing our domestic supply of sustainable biomass from different sources?*

Answer:

The principal challenges to increasing our domestic supply of biomass from forestry are land availability and challenges created by the regulatory process of approving the planting of new forests.

Chapter 2: End Use Biomass

Question 8 onwards: Considering other potential non-biomass options for decarbonisation (e.g. energy efficiency improvements, electrification, heat pumps), what do you consider as the main role and potential for the biomass feedstock types

⁴ [Roots for Further Growth 2019](#)

⁵ [Biodiversity, forestry and wood. Confor 2020](#)

identified in *Question 2* to contribute towards the UK's decarbonisation targets, and specifically in the following sectors?: Heat; Electricity; Transport; Agriculture; Industry; Chemicals and Materials.

Answer:

In the context of reducing the greatest amount of carbon in the atmosphere, it makes sense to promote markets like construction where wood (with the carbon in it) can be locked up for long periods of time and which provide opportunities for wood to displace materials, like steel and concrete, whose manufacture releases far higher amounts of carbon.

Any new policy or mechanism should be applied intelligently as for some types of forest the use of wood for bioenergy could be very appropriate, eg hardwood forests and in some geographic locations where there are few local markets.

When calculating carbon in forestry it is important to take a 'whole lifecycle' approach. A calculation could be made that managing trees for increased carbon stock would increase carbon on that area of land, but 'tinkering' with forest rotations can have the unintended consequence of reducing timber availability for the low-carbon wood processing sector, plus reducing levels of economic activity and rural jobs.

The potential for wood to contribute to decarbonisation should also be seen against the background of future wood availability. Because of the collapse in tree planting from the 1990s, especially of forests that will produce wood, it is forecast that the UK will reach 'peak wood' availability in the early 2030s followed by a forecasted sustained drop lasting until the 2070s. Given that the ETAP prioritises non-productive planting and new productive planting is slow to take off in Wales and Northern Ireland, it is highly unlikely that this fall in availability will be offset by increased planting in Scotland where, by Confor calculations, only about half of the area being planted each year is with productive forestry.

Chapter 3

Question 19. How do we improve global Governance to ensure biomass sustainability and what role does the UK play in achieving this?

Answer:

The UK is the second largest net import of timber in the world. The OECD Global Materials Resource Outlook⁶ forecasts that global timber demand will treble by 2060. Given that the UK faces a reduction in domestic wood supply from the 2030s the UK should take responsibility for producing more of its wood needs at home and not

⁶ <https://www.oecd.org/environment/global-material-resources-outlook-to-2060-9789264307452-en.htm>

offshore its responsibilities at a time when South America has lost 6.7% of total forest cover between 1990 and 2005⁷.

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⁷ [South America Forest Cover](#)