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Concerned Citizens at Condong

A group of about 60 concerned citizens gathered at Condong Cogeneration power plant on Tuesday to demonstrate their dismay at the process of burning forest woodchips to create electricity.

The “Biomass Action Group” (BAG) has come together with a common issue of how the “biomass fuel” industry is accelerating the logging & clear-felling of forests in the Northern Rivers. Members come from various non-profit local groups as well as concerned individuals.

This group has made previous attempts to question the operators of the Condong power plant - Cape Byron Power (CBP) – about the sources and volumes of woodchips they use for fuel. As yet they have received no response from the company.

Today representatives from BAG presented a written set of questions to CBP (which is owned by UK based investment company – Quinbrook).

The CBP's website lists among its fuel stocks “plantation timber grown specifically for energy production.”

Environmental scientist Shaunti Kiehl spoke for the Biomass Action Group, saying:

“Some plantations were in fact set up 20 years ago by companies investing with huge tax concessions, originally meant to produce high-value timber. The trees are now being chipped onsite in catchments around Kyogle, and reportedly sold for \$9/ton. We want to know how on earth you can justify burning trees amidst a climate emergency,” she said.

“We want to know what government subsidies, tax credits, grants, etc Cape Byron Power is getting. Our most important carbon sinks and water storage systems are going up in smoke, and we deserve to know why.” said BAG spokesperson and environmental scientist, Shaunti Kiehl.

Investigations into the social license in the Northern Rivers for bioenergy, conducted between 2012 and 2016 by Sustain Energy, found that there is very little social license for bioenergy projects in the Northern Rivers which would involve either combustion technologies or the use of wood as a feed stock. Their Report (see internet) found that people would need to be convinced that any wood used was indeed 'waste', had no better purpose, and was available as a sustainable supply into the future.

“New legislation has removed most restrictions on logging NSW forests, furthering grave concerns over bioenergy, as companies can now receive Renewable Energy Credits to clear-fell and chip native forests under the guise of 'wood waste,” said Scott Sledge, President of Northern Rivers Guardians. “The IPCC has stated that burning wood emits 50% to 80% more carbon than burning coal, along with a raft of other toxic pollutants. We are very concerned for our health and for our forests, and want to stop this biomass burning industry before it balloons out of control here, as it has done in the United States and Europe. “

“Even if new trees are planted now, the current level of harvesting is just not sustainable. Forests take from 25 to 200 years to grow back to the point of sequestering the carbon needed to rein in climate change.”

Many residents along the Kyogle – Murwillumbah Road communities were in attendance at Condong today, as they have lived with the woodchip truck movements 24/7 since logging ramped up more than

6 months ago. They are concerned about their safety, amenity, high noise levels, and what is in the trucks.

Mr. Sledge, who lives close to this road said, "The urgency to take climate action demands that we give incentives and subsidies only to real renewable energy technologies. I don't see how this biomass burning qualifies."

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