Wood burning harms our health and fuels climate change

Berlin, the 07.09.22

Dear Member of the European Parliament,

On September 13 you will vote on the proposal to revise the EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED III).

The Clean Air Working Group at KLUG and the signing health organizations HEAL, EPHA, DGPH and KlimaDocs call on you to stop classifying wood as a renewable energy source in RED III and to end subsidies for wood as an energy source.

The promotion of wood as a renewable energy source fuels the climate crisis and has multiple negative impacts on our health. As the World Health Organization and the prestigious Lancet Countdown have underscored many times, climate change harms our health through, for example, extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, wildfires, or an extended pollen season (1,2). Europe is the region most affected by heat-related mortality in people aged 65 years older and incurs the highest costs of heat-related mortality globally (2).

In light of the accelerating climate crisis, it is important and right for the EU to increase efforts to expand renewable energy, through the RED III revision.

However, promoting wood as a "renewable" energy source is a misguided approach to climate change mitigation. Analyses have shown that burning wood produces more CO_2 than burning coal, oil or gas (3). This is true for combustion in power plants, heating systems, and small wood burners in households. In addition, forests are destroyed as natural CO_2 sinks and may even become CO_2 sources because of deforestation and other disturbances (4).

Furthermore, wood combustion is a major source of particulate matter emissions and fuels air pollution. In Europe, around 400,000 people die prematurely each year from air pollution (5). Particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$) is absorbed into the bloodstream through the lungs, reaching all organs (even the brain), which can lead to many diseases, including cancer (6).

Burning wood in pellet stoves can produce more particulate matter than burning gas or oil (7). Replacing fossil fuels with wood will therefore lead to an increase in air pollution with all the associated negative effects on health. Wood burning stoves are even more problematic from this point of view (7). According to the German Federal Environment Agency, fine dust emissions from wood burning stoves in private households in Germany are now even higher than emissions from exhaust gases from road traffic (8). Meanwhile, in Europe, wood-based home appliances are responsible for 12,6 billion euros of health-related costs (9).

Wood-fired power plants may also emit more particulate matter than coal-fired power plants (10). Thus, the use of wood for energy in power plants, heating systems and wood burning stoves not only fuels the climate crisis, but also pollutes the air and thus harms health in several ways.

We therefore urge you not to agree to further classification of wood as a renewable energy source and to end the subsidies for wood burning as a renewable energy source.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions,

Yours sincerely,

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