



Sustainable Wood Energy Production Requires Adequate Supply, Technology and Information for Comprehensive Forest Sector Planning

Summary, conclusions and recommendations from the sub-regional wood energy workshop in Riga, Latvia on 15-16 September 2009

Summary

The workshop on “Current and future woody biomass for energy – Monitoring use and understanding technology” was hosted by the Latvian Ministry of Agriculture in Riga on 15-16 September 2009. The meeting was organized by the Riga Technological University, the UNECE/FAO Timber Section and the FAO Sub-regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe. It was sponsored thanks to the Swedish Ministry of Agriculture. It was held under the auspices of the UNECE Timber Committee and the FAO European Forestry Commission, and mandated by their Working Party on Forest Economics and Statistics.

The European Union and its Member Countries have established high targets for the use of renewable energy sources. Specifically the EU intends to have 20% of energy consumption from renewables by 2020. As the majority of renewable energy now comes from woody biomass, many governments have policies to promote increased supply and consumption. These policies are having consequences on traditional forest products markets and presenting challenges to mobilize supplies of biomass, despite Europe’s forests currently being harvested at rates of approximately 60% of their annual growth, i.e. far below their sustainable potential. Subsidies and tariffs to promote greater wood energy production, trade and use can have an unexpected negative impact on traditional wood and paper product manufacturers.

EU Member Countries are required to prepare National Renewable Energy Action Plans by the end of June 2010. The Joint Wood Energy Enquiry was developed as a tool for data collection and is in its third round of collecting national statistics and estimations. Based on the previous two enquiries, wood energy consumption has increased by 3.5% annually between 2005 and 2007. Countries responding to the Enquiry have an advantage in preparing their National Renewable Energy Action Plan, as clear, factual information is a critical basis for policymakers. For wood and paper products production, some countries have good information available for the current and expected wood fibre demands; however, current wood energy promotion policies are impacting the wood and paper industry, for example by raising the cost of wood raw materials. Conversely, forest owners and residue producers have profited by having the alternative markets for low-grade wood and processing by-products, especially at this time of economic crisis. This scenario necessitates establishing realistic targets for renewable energy sources, balancing traditional wood processing industry needs with the growing energy needs combined with the sustainable availability of woody biomass in all its various forms, in the short, medium and long term.

The workshop provided an opportunity for cross-sectoral cooperation and collaboration between stakeholders. The 60 participants from 11 countries represented governments (including policymakers and statisticians) research institutions and universities, trade associations, private industry and international organizations. They discussed the issues on wood energy data development, quality and

dissemination in relation to the urgent need to be able to more accurately assess the growing demand for wood-based energy and its supply. Wood-based energy produced with modern production and combustion technology mitigates climate change as it is a carbon neutral solution to replacing non-renewable fossil fuels.

The workshop took place during an extremely difficult macro-economic situation, with many European countries suffering economic recession. All forest products markets have been negatively affected by this economic crisis – with the important exception of wood energy. In order to secure alternative sources of energy, especially a sustainable supply of renewable energies, European governments had enacted policies to promote wood energy, especially in light of the spike in fossil fuel energy costs in 2008. These policies continue to drive the market for wood energy, despite the negative economic situation.

Conclusions (not in order of priority):

- The best possible information on wood volumes used for energy generation is needed. Aggregated data are critical for evaluation, but detailed data are necessary for sector planning, but currently many countries lack adequate quality data on wood energy
- The data of the Joint Wood Energy Enquiry (JWEE) provide the best available dataset on wood energy sources and uses.
- The JWEE provides a complete dataset to prepare table 7 for the National Renewable Energy Action Plan.
- Despite considerable efforts, it is difficult to evaluate the significant quantities of wood consumption for energy generation by households.
- In some countries the lack of communication between different ministries hinders the efficient development of domestic wood energy markets.

Recommendations (not in order of priority):

- The FAO/UNECE Working Party on Forest Economics and Statistics should mandate development and dissemination of guidelines and best practices to conduct internationally comparable domestic household wood energy surveys.
- Countries are requested to strengthen their wood energy information systems by giving adequate resources to the statistical entities to duly conduct, assess and disseminate the current development of wood energy markets.
- In order to prepare EU National Renewable Energy Action Plans, especially its table 7 on wood energy consumption by sources, intensive coordination is required among all ministries involved, agencies and stakeholders.
- The UNECE Timber Committee and the FAO European Forestry Commission should raise the importance of the issues of the workshop by continuing to support additional international meetings.