

Bioenergy Roadmap
Australian Renewable Energy Agency

This submission is by Lighter Footprints Inc, a community based environmental group that has a large and active membership and supporter base of around 2000 residents in the Boroondara and Whitehorse municipalities of Melbourne. We were formed in 2006 to raise awareness of the growing threat of climate change to our environment and to encourage decision makers at all levels of government to respond to a crisis which has now become an emergency.

We note that the purpose of this roadmap is to:

... to identify the role that the bioenergy sector can play in accelerating Australia's energy transition, stimulating regional development, enhancing energy security and helping Australia further reduce our emissions.

... help to inform the next series of investment and policy decisions in the bioenergy sector in Australia. It will be an important input into the Australian Government's Technology Investment Roadmap and will potentially help us capitalise on opportunities to enhance Australia's energy security and further reduce our emissions.¹

We support the intention behind these consultations in that we recognise the need to investigate all possibilities that can contribute to Australia reducing its carbon emissions to zero as quickly as possible. The use of biomass from a range of organic products including sugar cane waste has merit, and should be examined to ensure these products have both no negative environmental impact and a sound economic base.

We are, however, opposed to any proposal to include waste generated by the forestry sector, especially that from native forests as a source of biomass to generate energy.

- Bioenergy generated from forest based biomass is not a net zero contributor to carbon emissions over the longer term.

This approach is based on the presumption that the carbon emitted by the burning of forestry residues is cancelled out by the future growth of new trees. This fails to appreciate either the significant amount of carbon released at the time of the burning or the long time frame involved in the regrowth of replacement trees.

- Support for projects to use forest based residues to create bioenergy diverts resources away from projects that build on the already well developed knowledge and expertise in other areas of renewable energy.

We already know that technologies such as solar and wind can generate renewable energy at a lower cost than fossil based methods. Other technical opportunities that could be quickly and predictably explored include hydrogen from renewable sources and small scale hydro plants. And yet we see these opportunities being starved for

¹ <https://arena.gov.au/assets/2020/04/bioenergy-roadmap-call-for-submissions.pdf>

research funds to address specific barriers that inhibit their widespread use including storage and market development or to enable commercialisation.

- Energy policy should be directed at creating clean, low emission energy supplies for a sustainable economy and not be used to prop up faltering industry sectors.

We acknowledge that the logging of native forests has been a vital part of the economy and culture of many small regional towns. We believe however, that the environmental costs associated with logging native forests far outweigh the economic benefits. The further attempt to improve the profitability of these operations by developing an environmentally damaging product through the use of the timber residues is poor economics.

The Bioenergy Roadmap should not be used for the secondary purpose of maintaining the native forest industry sector by creating a new market for its waste. Apart from the fact that the energy generated from forest residues will continue to add to our carbon emissions, this new market will do little to address the economic and social problems confronting these rural communities.

Victoria's native forest timber industry has relied on government subsidies to maintain its profitability. These subsidies can be direct or promised transfers or indirect through foregone revenue such as tax breaks, provision of goods and services such as roads, research or other general support and access to undervalued public land or forest assets. For example, Victoria's possum subsidy represented the substantial difference between profit and loss for VicForests in recent years².

We also point to the impact that these operations have on watersheds and rivers in these areas, the low levels of profitability of many small sawmills that rely on these resources, the low wages and dangerous working conditions facing the workforce and the failure to release capability to seize other economic opportunities in these areas.

We welcome the plan by the Victorian Government to assist the timber industry to move away from logging native forest³. This makes a clear acknowledgement of the value of these forests other than as a source of wood fibre. These forests represent significant carbon sinks, irreplaceable protectors of biodiversity and sources of economic opportunities such as tourism and products such as honey and seeds.

If you have any queries about the content of our submission, please contact me on 0411 115 186.

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² <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/07/native-forest-logging-to-be-phased-out-by-2030-as-victoria-plans-timber-transition>

³ <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-forestry-plan>

