

Secure Supply



Andy Hill, in his role as chair of the Wood Recyclers Association, explains why we need to recognise the value of waste wood as an asset towards the UK's energy security

It's within many of our lifetimes that we can remember the days of power cuts, coal miner strikes and the like. The days when the UK's energy market was dominated by fossil fuels and we knew of nothing else that could reliably supply us with our increasing need for heat and power.

Thankfully those particular memories are confined to the 1970s and, almost four decades later, we have moved on considerably, both in terms of knowledge and use of resources.

As chair of the Wood Recyclers Association (WRA) my remit includes promoting the needs of the waste wood sector in the UK. However, it also includes ensuring people understand the valuable contribution the sector makes to the country's economy and, specifically in this instance, the country's energy security.

For many years WRA members have been preventing waste wood from going to landfill and recycling it into a number of different products, but primarily feedstock for panel board and various types of animal beddings.

Over the past five years, however, we have seen huge growth in waste wood being recovered for use in biomass. The UK's Renewables Policy has played a big part in this, realising rapid growth in biomass supply to generate electricity, with wood recyclers supplying around 1.5m tonnes of processed post-consumer waste wood to biomass facilities last year.

This year that figure is set to double, with an additional 1.6m tonnes of new waste wood biomass facilities under construction and due to begin operations. These facilities burn biomass manufactured from waste wood as a fuel to produce power and, in some cases, combined heat and power. They also significantly contribute to the UK's overall energy security, reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and further reducing the amount of materials sent to landfill.

The 3.1m tonnes of waste wood biomass expected to be used this year alone represents around 2.9 TWh of annual domestic power production, that's enough to supply over 700,000 UK households.

It signifies the success of the UK Renewables Policy, with

all forms of renewable energy now accounting for around 25 percent of energy production and coal just 10 percent. This compares to 1990, when coal represented 70 percent, nuclear 20 percent and oil 10 percent.

But more than that, the introduction of biomass as an energy source has begun to move our country away from the historic model of centralised energy generation and towards the development of localised distributed networks.

Biomass power stations are increasingly fuelling local industrial operations, as well as the national network. This means minimal investment is required for additional infrastructure. They are also helping to reduce emissions and enabling us to retain our waste wood in the UK and use it as a valuable resource.

In addition, the new biomass infrastructure, in conjunction with current end markets for waste wood, should be sufficient in order to ensure no – or at least very limited – volumes of waste wood is sent to landfill, plus the on-going supply chain for waste wood biomass is robust; people and industry will not stop producing waste wood.

Billions of pounds have been invested to ensure full recovery capacity from landfill. WRA members have invested heavily over the past few years in both processing equipment and additional measures to ensure they are compliant with regulations, and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

We are also hopeful that a new way forward has opened up with our industry regulators and that by working together they will see the benefit this sector brings to the UK and the importance it plays in so many areas, including energy security.

We recognise our country needs a mixed portfolio of energy generation, whether coal, gas, nuclear, wind, solar or biomass. We also recognise that many hold strong views over the environmental impact and efficiency of each.

But most of all we recognise the benefit our sector brings in terms of the UK's energy security, landfill reduction of waste wood – potentially 100 percent – as well as reducing emission targets and the full use of UK resources. ■