

Wood energy at COFO 2005

Governments show heightened interest in the links between wood energy and sustainable development.

Wood energy is the dominant source of energy for over 2 billion people, particularly for heating and cooking in households in developing countries. More than 50 percent of the world's roundwood production is used as woodfuel (fuelwood and charcoal), and for some developing regions this portion is over 80 percent. Therefore, the issue of woodfuels should be an integral part of sustainable forest management.

The reality is that policy-makers and forest managers have paid relatively insignificant attention to this issue in the past. The reasons may include lack of reliable data on production and consumption of woodfuels; lack of understanding among policy-makers of the potential of biofuels; and lack of coordination among the forestry, agriculture and energy sectors in national governments. However, the wind recently appears to have changed, with the climate change debate stimulating renewed interest in bioenergy in both developed and developing countries. Heightened interest at the political level was evident at COFO 2005: a number of delegates spoke out to stress the importance of bioenergy, in particular wood energy.

A COFO side event entitled "Forests and bioenergy" was organized to highlight wood energy's linkages with sustainable rural development and to identify changes in forestry policies that can promote the development

of national wood energy industries. Three presentations were given to raise awareness and provide food for thought.

Amantino Ramos de Freitas of the Brazilian Society for Silviculture discussed links between wood energy and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs do not specifically mention energy, but access to clean, safe and affordable energy is indispensable for poverty alleviation. In most developing countries, bioenergy is generally regarded as an energy source for those who are poor and lack access to modern technology, whereas in developed countries the switch from fossil fuels to bioenergy is a much-sought advance. The developing countries need not necessarily follow the path that the developed countries took, i.e. from bioenergy to fossil fuels to a renewed appreciation of bioenergy. However, national policy support and technical and financial assistance from the international community will be needed if the developing countries are to bypass the transition to fossil fuels to the greatest extent possible.

Some developed countries, for example in Europe, accord a high priority to increasing the share of renewable energy in their attempts to address global climate change. Expanded use of wood for energy is one of the realistic options, but there are hurdles to overcome, particularly high cost. Pentti Hakkila of VTT Wood Energy Technology showed why the use of woody biomass is economically viable in Finland, where it seems to be progressing satisfactorily.

For most of the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), however, promotion of wood energy industries still remains a difficult endeavour. Kyriakos Maniatis of the European Commission elaborated on the potential for further development of bioenergy industries, emphasizing that there is a greater need for policy instruments than for technology development.

The use of wood energy is closely linked to sustainable rural development (shown, a wood-burning oven used for smoking fish, Ghana)



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