

Firm that receives millions from govt in court over concerns dust from wood pellets endangers workers

An energy company that receives multimillion pound government subsidies for burning biomass is facing criminal prosecution following concerns that dust from its wood pellets allegedly posed a risk to employees' health.

Drax, whose power station burns woody biomass to generate electricity, is being hauled up in court by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) on two offences, Sky News can reveal.

The power giant is accused of exposing employees to wood dust at its Selby plant, thereby risking their "health, safety and welfare at work".

It is also charged with breaching risk assessment obligations before allowing employees to work with potentially "hazardous substances" at the biomass station, which is the [largest in the UK](#).

A Drax spokesperson told Sky News in a statement: "The health, safety and wellbeing of our colleagues is a priority for Drax.

Advertisement

"As this is an ongoing legal issue we cannot provide any further information at this time."

Drax has received many hundreds of millions of pounds in direct government subsidies for generating renewable electricity, totalling £790m in 2019 and £832m in 2020, according to analysis by clean energy think tank [Ember](#).

More on Drax

Climate change: contentious plans to remove emissions could actually increase them, report warns

Ember's chief operating officer and lead UK analyst, Phil MacDonald, told Sky News: "I very much hope that the health of workers has not been ignored as the UK has embraced biomass as a climate-friendly electricity source."

Biomass use in the UK has surged amid [climate change](#) policies to phase out fossil fuels, generating [12% of the UK's electricity in 2020](#).

Even though burning biomass releases greenhouse gases, it can be considered renewable because plants suck up gases like carbon dioxide as they re-grow.

In the early years of biomass, some hoped only waste products would be burned, which would have soon decomposed and released carbon anyway. However, a huge industry of harvesting trees for wood pellets has emerged and this is how Drax sources [much of its biomass](#).

According to almost 800 scientists, who in [2018 wrote a letter](#) to the European parliament, using wood deliberately harvested for burning will increase carbon in the atmosphere and warming for decades at least, even when wood replaces coal or oil, and even if the forest management is "sustainable".

Ember's Mr MacDonald said: "Looking at the bigger picture, the UK still treats burning wood in power stations as if it were carbon neutral, despite recent science demonstrating this is unlikely to be true.

"The UK government needs to fundamentally reassess the costs

and benefits of the technology before releasing new subsidies to the industry.”

According to the [HSE](#) guidance on health and safety legislation, employers must not exceed a workplace limit on wood dust exposure, and control measures include dust extraction, respirators and skin checks.

The first hearing is expected at 10am on 30 November 2021 at Leeds Magistrate Court.

Sky News has launched the first daily prime time news show dedicated to climate change.

The Daily Climate Show is broadcast at 6.30pm and 9.30pm Monday to Friday on Sky News, the Sky News website and app, on YouTube and Twitter.

Hosted by Anna Jones, it follows Sky News correspondents as they investigate how global warming is changing our landscape and how we all live our lives.

The show also highlights solutions to the crisis and how small changes can make a big difference.