



Don't let the fox guard the hen house! Conflicts of interest procedures must be improved

By Lim Li Lin, Third World Network

In 2017, civil society organizations (CSOs) made public their findings from open records requests in the US and Canada, dubbing them the "Gene Drive Files".

The Gene Drive Files demonstrated that the CBD and its Protocols are not immune from undue influence from industry and other vested interests, that run counter to their objectives, purposes and principles.

A number of experts that had been appointed to the AHTEG on Synthetic Biology were working for institutions that received over US\$100 million combined in US military and philanthropic funds expressly to develop and test gene drive systems.

These conflicts of interest had not been declared partly because there was no requirement to do so in the CBD processes.

This situation likely helped encourage CBD Parties to adopt the 'Procedure to avoid or manage conflicts of interests in expert groups' that serve the CBD, in decision 14/33 in 2018.

It contains an 'Interest Disclosure Form' that any person nominated to serve on a technical expert group would have to complete and submit to the CBD Secretariat.

CSOs have continually asserted that disclosure of interest is a good starting point for dealing with conflicts of interest, and that such disclosure of interests should not be limited to technical expert groups alone.

In addition, the larger issue of corporate interests that unduly influence the CBD agenda remains largely unaddressed.

Recent developments in the risk assessment AHTEG clearly show that there need to be improvements in the CBD procedures.

CSOs raised concerns regarding the failure of a member to disclose his interest although he works for an organization developing gene drive organisms, the subject matter of the AHTEG deliberations, and moreover drafted the zero draft of the guidance materials on risk assessment of gene drive organisms.

This matter was brought to the attention of the Secretariat, with the CSOs arguing that a prima facie case could be made establishing that the expert concerned should have disclosed his situation, which might have been perceived as affecting the objectivity and independence of his contribution, thus affecting the outcome of the expert group's work.

This case, and the lessons learnt, are reflected in the report on the implementation of the procedure to SBI-4. Improvements to the procedure have been recommended by CSOs and are urgently needed.

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How Perverse Incentives for Biomass Power Undermine the GBF

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Climate change and biodiversity loss are pressing and interlinked global crises. The Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and Parties to the Paris Agreement call for enhanced coherence to reach climate and biodiversity targets, as enshrined in GBF Target 8 and the first Global Stocktake (GST). Contrary to the latest science, however, many climate pledges include burning trees for energy—biomass—as a mitigation option.

This practice stems from the misconception that energy from forest biomass while being renewable is also 'carbon neutral'. Countries exploit a loophole in international carbon accounting, omitting CO₂ released from burning biomass from energy sector accounts. In reality, emissions from burning wood often exceed those from coal per unit of energy produced.

Developed countries in particular heavily incentivize forest biomass, sometimes more so than genuine renewables such as wind and solar. For example, South Korea subsidizes biomass through Renewable Energy Credits (RECs). The Korean government determined the REC weightings based on the flawed assumption that biomass is zero-emissive, aligning with the industry's claim that logging for biomass is part of 'sustainable forest management'.

However, the government overlooks the fact that 83% of wood pellets are imported, including from biodiverse natural forests in Southeast Asia, Russia, and Canada. Additionally, clear-cutting accounts for 87% of Korea's 'forest residues' fuels. Since 2015, Korea's biomass power has received an estimated 3.7 billion USD worth of RECs, resulting in cumulative emissions of over 70 MtCO₂.

Biomass energy is now one of the most heavily subsidized and rapidly growing threats to biodiversity. Annual policy incentives for biomass are estimated to be 15 billion EUR in the EU27, 1 billion GBP in the UK, and 400 million USD equivalent in Korea. Support for biomass is a textbook case of subsidies harmful to biodiversity per GBF Target 18, justified only by abusing the carbon accounting loophole.

All Parties should phase out subsidies for biomass starting in 2025. Support for the worst types of biomass, such as coal-and-biomass co-firing and burning of primary woody biomass, should be immediately eliminated. The updated National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) should include time-bound plans for the removal of all harmful incentives. Continuing to incentivize burning forests and calling it renewable only exacerbates the loss of biodiversity and forests, leaving us with an even narrower window to avert the climate crisis

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