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Carbon budgets are having increasingly perverse effects

If we pursue domestic policies which raise bills and make people poorer, no other country will follow our lead



The Drax plant in Selby, North Yorkshire, generates electricity by burning wood largely shipped in from overseas forests. It's become a central part of the UK's climate strategy. The idea is that as trees grow back they recapture the carbon, therefore the CO₂ emitted by generation can — eventually — be offset. This is currently classed as “clean” energy, which is subsidised by billpayers at a cost of around £500 million a year.

Drax produces four times more carbon than our last coal power plant. Coal, as a reminder, has roughly twice the carbon emissions of gas.

Not only are the emission-offsetting trees not growing back quickly enough but in August, Drax faced a £25 million fine for misreporting the type of wood it was using. Investigations by BBC Panorama even allege that wood was being used from old forests which are “rare, at risk and irreplaceable”. Not to mention that the wood pellets are brought across the Atlantic on diesel-chugging ships.

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Protesters against the Drax plant outside the Labour party conference in Liverpool last month

MILO CHANDLER/ALAMY

So does Drax at least offer us cheaper energy in return? No — every megawatt hour (MWh) of electricity it produces costs £138, compared with around £80 for gas. That's why Drax's critics range from climate activists like Greenpeace to fiscal hawks like [Dominic Lawson](#).

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So why have successive energy ministers persisted? Well, this is where carbon budgets come in. The Climate Change Act stipulates targets to remove carbon from our economy. For our sixth carbon budget, the UK has committed to remove 23 million tonnes (Mt) through greenhouse gas removals. Without Drax we cannot meet that target, which would then legally require us to set out unacceptable alternatives that come with hefty price tags or force behavioural change on an unwilling public.

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Procrastination is not laziness. It is a **depression** response.

Procrastination is an emotion regulation problem. If you're interested in discovering your dominant Procrastination type, taking an assessment can be a helpful starting point.

Dreamer	Mixed	Perfectionist	Overdoer	Worrier
Verbal fluency	Critical thinking	Nature connection	Spatial reasoning	Nature connection
Wordplay	Problem-solving	Eco understanding	Concept visual	Eco understanding
Communication	Analytical reasoning	Nature observer	Artistic creativity	Nature observer
Poetic expression	Strategizing			Pattern identification
Storytelling	Mathematical			Gardening skills

Take test

That's because Drax plans to become a first-of-a-kind bioenergy carbon capture plant, otherwise known as Beccs (bioenergy with carbon capture and storage), meeting most of our greenhouse gas removals target. This doesn't come for free. It

would need a £30-£40 billion subsidy costing up to £1.7 billion per year, increasing the already high cost of energy that Drax produces.

But we cannot go green by burning trees at huge cost to the public. It would mean energy bills going up to subsidise technology that we would not want to see replicated in other parts of the world. If the widespread burning of forests is part of the solution to climate change, then we have to ask ourselves what problem we are trying to solve.



The power station was responsible for four times more carbon emissions than the UK's last remaining coal-fired plant last year

GETTY

As secretary of state, I faced enormous insistence from officials to pass legislation to enshrine these plans. However, after a development consent order was sent off in

my name, I started pulling at threads and the case for Beccs simply unravelled.

The final pushback I always got was: “But, Minister, we have to do it because of our carbon budgets.” I refused. This became such a regular occurrence that I banned civil servants from presenting me with arguments in such terms. Instead, I insisted that each policy had to either benefit billpayers or businesses, or indeed reduce global carbon emissions.

I believe, as the British public does, in protecting our natural environment. However, as I warned in April, our legally binding carbon budgets — kickstarted by Ed Miliband in 2008 and, admittedly, continued by successive Conservative governments — are creating a complex web of targets and quotas tantamount to central planning. This is having increasingly perverse effects, as centrally planned systems inevitably do.

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If businesses find the cost of going “green” too expensive and move to countries powered by coal, that would increase global emissions. If we pursue domestic policies which raise bills and make people poorer, no other country will follow our lead. We would be a warning, not an example. The Beccs conundrum is a perfect example of why the system needs a rethink.

Claire Coutinho was secretary of state for energy security and net zero from 2023-24

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