



The Drax power station in North Yorkshire wants to use new carbon capture technology

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Tories withdraw support for Drax carbon capture plan

Claire Coutinho, the shadow net zero secretary, said that on closer examination the case for the scheme “simply unravelled”



Steven Swinford, Political Editor | [Adam Vaughan](#), Environment Editor

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Plans to fit green technology on the most polluting power station in Britain are being opposed by the Conservatives amid concerns the scheme is fuelled by the mass burning of trees.

The Drax power plant in North Yorkshire, almost 40 miles east of Leeds, generates electricity by burning wood pellets imported from North America. It has received billions of pounds in subsidies since switching from coal to biomass in 2012.

The plant has won the [support of successive governments](#) by claiming that it is “carbon neutral” because trees that are felled to produce the pellets absorb as much carbon dioxide while growing as they emit when they are burnt. The power station is by far the largest single source of CO₂ emissions in the UK.

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Drax now wants to fit its biomass power station with Beccs technology, which stands for bioenergy with [carbon capture and storage](#).

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The scheme would involve burning trees to produce power before capturing the emitted CO₂ and storing it underground. Because trees grown to replace those burnt would absorb CO₂, the facility would, in theory, remove carbon from the atmosphere.

The Tories now argue, however, that the environmental damage and the scale of the government subsidies involved outweigh the benefits.

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Rishi Sunak with Claire Coutinho, his energy and net zero secretary when the Tories were in government

LEON NEAL/REUTERS

They had previously approved the proposals but Claire Coutinho, the shadow net zero secretary, said that on closer examination the case for the scheme “simply - unravelled”.

She added: “We cannot go green by burning trees at huge cost to the public. 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.”

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Beccs has been included in climate models by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as the chief way to remove CO₂ emissions from the atmosphere and rein in global warming.

A team at University College London found in a 2021 report that the technology had a “significant” role to play in the UK meeting its 2050 net zero emissions goal.

Coutinho’s intervention comes before government advisers on the Climate Change Committee release advice next year on [how much CO₂ the UK can legally emit](#) from 2038 to 2042. If Ed Miliband, the energy and net zero secretary, accepts the target,



referred to as the seventh carbon budget, the government will be required for the first time to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere.

Ember, the environmental think tank, has calculated that the Beccs scheme at Drax [could cost £43.3 billion over 25 years](#), an increase on its original estimate of £31.7 billion. Officials at the power station dispute the figures, insisting that they are based on unrealistic assumptions.

Phil MacDonald, managing director at Ember, welcomed Coutinho's comments, saying she could help bring the scheme to an end.

"It's already a complex long-term project that wouldn't even begin in this parliament," he said. "We now know that a possible next government would not support it."

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MacDonald said the scheme would “soak up” billions of pounds in research and development that could be used to drive other innovations.

“The UK must produce more of its electricity here at home,” he said. “It’s urgent that we stop importing gas and wood as soon as possible.”

Duncan Brack, an independent biomass expert at the Chatham House think tank, said the new Conservative stance was surprising but welcome.

“When they were in government, they gave no indication of any doubts about the value of Beccs,” he said. “I don’t understand what’s caused them to change their views so radically.”

Brack said he was not opposed to all uses of Beccs but could not see how the [wood pellets imported from North America](#) could be sustainable.

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“This focuses attention on what the really sustainable negative emissions solutions should be,” he added. “Clearly we have to have some sort of CO₂ removal. Probably the best is forest expansion and peatland protection and expansion. But there will be some technological solutions and probably Beccs has a small role to play.”

Drax described the Conservatives’ decision as reckless and irresponsible. Will Gardiner, chief executive of the Drax Group, said: “It is deeply disappointing that they now care more about political point scoring than the country’s ongoing energy security and ability to meet net zero.”

He said that in government the party acknowledged Drax’s key role and Coutinho’s comments would upset workers at the power station. He added: “It will also lead to concerns across our country-wide supply chain and among other UK based biomass generators.”



The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero was contacted for comment.

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