

WBPI - the voice of the global panel industry



There is a danger that the Venice Declaration may be taken as a case of industry special pleading. The declaration, should you have missed it, emanated from the EPF's Annual Meeting in that canal-ridden city, (see page 44) and urged, among other things, an end to the financial incentives that are

encouraging the headlong rush to build wood-chip-fuelled power stations.

A hasty reading of the declaration might conclude that the plea is based on selfishness. The demand for wood chip is driving up the price and reducing the supply available for boards and panels; so panel-producers are strapped for raw material, and pressured on prices and hence on profitability.

That interpretation of the Venice Declaration is a superficial one. Nevertheless, it may be the argument that the general public gets hold of - and might well reject.

The general public knows that burning sustainably-grown wood is better than burning fossil fuel: it adds less greenhouse gas to the atmosphere and so is an effective weapon against climate change. Why then should that same general public want to hold back on building wood-burning power stations? And why, in comparison to that necessary and indeed noble goal of saving the planet, should the public care very much if the wood based panels industry suffers?

But the true argument of the Declaration runs much deeper. It is this: Wood is a valuable resource. We should extract as much use from each particle of it as possible. Burning it straight from the tree is appallingly wasteful.

Do indeed build wood-fired power stations. But do not feed them with virgin wood. Feed them with recycled wood – wood that has already served mankind usefully, as panels, or boards, or furniture, or as housing or flooring or any of the other myriad useful things that timber can provide. Let it carry out that purpose for as long as it can - for ten or twenty or fifty or a hundred years, or for five hundred years; there are plenty of wood-framed houses that old. During all those years it will be serving a dual purpose – as the product itself, and as a carbon sink, helping to alleviate climate change. At the end of its useful life, recycle it – either into another wood-based product or, if that is not possible, into the power-station furnace to give energy.

That is the true circular economy that is the heart of the message from Venice. Yes, do burn wood – but after you have used it for other purposes, not before. Wood is the most sustainable material of any on earth, and technology is making it longer-lasting, more versatile, and more useful to mankind all the time. That is the message that our industry should be telling the public. Wood-based industries, properly run, are the most ecological and sustainable on this planet. Hence the Venice declaration. If the industry will not make that argument to the public, who will?

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