

# Biofuels Northern Ireland

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## ***Response to Consultation – “Renewable Electricity in Ireland – A 2020 Vision”***

The phrase used in the Foreword “***This work has an urgency to it***” may be considered somewhat naïve and even cynical, given the abject failure by the Northern Ireland administration to comply with the recommendations given in the many previous papers, reports and consultations. Such as -

July 1993 (DED NI) – The Prospects for Renewable Energy in Northern Ireland

March 1999 (DTI) – New and Renewable Energy – Prospects for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

June 1999 (DED NI) – Renewable Energy in the Millennium – the Northern Ireland Potential

November 2000 (DTI / University of Ulster – Foresight; Energy Futures Task Force) Fuelling the Future - Making the future work for you

October 2001 (DETINI / NI Assembly) – Renewable Energy in Northern Ireland – Realising the Potential

February 2002 (DETINI) – Towards a New Energy Market Strategy for Northern Ireland

Together with many other more specific reports dealing with particular aspects of renewable energy, but equally disregarded and left to gather dust on office shelves. What is being presented now is a series of questions – essentially constitutional, procedural or bureaucratic. The fact is, if you want the right answers you must first ask the right questions. I am not convinced that the right questions are being asked.

As noted in the consultation document, in 1993, 20 projects were awarded contracts under the Northern Ireland Non Fossil Fuel Obligation, totalling a capacity of 15.7MW at 6p per kWh. In 1996, 10 contracts totalling 16.27MW at 4p per kWh. In the event, only 16 schemes bore fruit, totalling 14.9MW.

Was any analysis carried out to determine, firstly, why half of the contracts awarded were unfulfilled and, secondly, were the parameters under which the contracts were awarded valid? What effect did the reduction in price level have? In other words, were the right contractual decisions made?

Secondly, has there been any investigation carried out to determine the barriers – actual or perceived - to progress? This may appear basic, but it has become evident that there have been introduced, in recent years, significant legislative and bureaucratic barriers. These have led to both financial and administrative disincentives. As in – “Is it really worth the bother?”

Examples of such are delays in obtaining planning consent, more stringent and – in many cases – more expensive restrictions imposed by EU-specified technical requirements, the strident objections of NIMBYs (not in my back yard) and the over-enthusiasm of not always fully technically qualified staff of the Environment Agency.

Added to that is the dearth of information on comparison of the various options open to a particular course of action – do windmills really cause more bird deaths than loss of natural habitat due to global warming? This needs to be readily available and disseminated more pro-actively by the DED.

The third aspect of this consultation is the evident lack of understanding of the nature of renewable energy. Essentially, they are dissipated energy resources, requiring concentration. For example, the calorific value of short rotation coppice wood is around one third that of coal. It therefore requires three times as much transportation to take it to the generator, which adds to its cost and detracts from its carbon contribution. Ergo, it is better to have small, simple, localised CHP plants than a centralised generator. This is a matter of common sense and has been exemplified by the comparison between the Arbre and Ely projects.

This, of course, militates against the objective of cross-border cooperation, save in the areas of integrated generation control and grid interconnection.

There is, however, one area that requires more serious consideration, and that is the potential for tidal energy generation in Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough. Totally reliable in both generation capacity and phasing, the projects are capital intensive, will require the resources of both jurisdictions and thereby usefully occupy those public employees currently engaged in theorising, forecasting and the carrying out of yet another wasteful consultation exercise.

The fourth area of concern is that this consultation is limited to the generation of electricity from renewable resources, totally ignoring the impending UK Renewable Transport Fuels Obligation. Civilisation as we know it depends on transport. It consumes 40% of energy resources and causes 35% of all pollution. The fuels required are far more limited in scope than the generation of electricity – biodiesel, bioethanol and the largely untapped potential of methane.

(N.B. a few facts –  
fuel cells, after 150 years of research, still cost 100 times as much as the equivalent internal combustion engine;  
hydrogen is 75% energy negative to produce and is 5 times as expensive to store and handle than petrol or diesel fuel;  
hybrid vehicles use as much fuel as a smaller conventional vehicle, and at 50% additional cost;  
it requires almost a hectare of land to provide the biodiesel used by an average 10,000 mile a year motorist,  
and crude oil price reached US\$67 on 12 August 2005.)

It is therefore necessary to balance the natural resources between the competing demands of both transport and electricity generation. This is not being considered and totally negates the usefulness of this consultation.

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Publication permitted