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Making woodfuel work – Welsh aim high and learn valuable lessons in Europe

Wales is aiming high with its plans for switching to renewable energy, and woodfuel is a key element in delivering the Welsh Assembly's target of 4 terawatts(TWh) of energy from sustainable resources by 2010.

And a team from Robinwood, the Forestry Commission Wales European project which aims to help give rural Europe a new future, has just returned from Germany – where wood fuel now plays a major role in energy production.

The fact-finding tour looked at how combined heat and power projects (CHP) have taken off, the new ways the industry is bringing wood fuel to market and the benefits in jobs and income to rural areas from a business that is making a come back.

The Welsh team brought back valuable inside information on how wood fuel can play a vital role in rural regeneration – and identified some of the pitfalls that the Germans have discovered with their latest work.

So far the Wood Energy Business Scheme – also run by Forestry Commission Wales – has 64 wood energy projects either live or under construction throughout Wales – with another 100 potential schemes in the pipeline.

The programme is providing valuable impetus for growth across the home wood fuel sector, with at least ten installation companies now based in Wales, including the first two wood pellet manufacturers and new small businesses setting up to supply the growing demand for wood chip.

“Vital to the success of wood fuel is making sure systems can cope with all types of different fuel sources,” said FC Wales policy chief Chris Edwards who headed the Welsh team.

One of the big opportunities in Germany has been the use low value waste wood as a fuel source, with special combined heat and power (CHP) plants built to take advantage of this cheap energy source.

However, there have been difficulties, at Spreenberg, 80k south east of Berlin the new plant has suffered from problems. Major fluctuations in fuel quality, and its contamination with metal and other materials has lead to constant stoppages.

Worse still, waste wood has gone up in value by 300 per cent over 12 months because of the new demand. But suppliers are locked in to supplying fixed price energy, and the plant is facing severe financial difficulties.

“Wales can and must learn from teething problems encountered in our partner regions,” said Chris By ensuring that the wood energy schemes we install across Wales can use all kinds of biomass, from wood chip to sawmill waste, energy crops to pellets, we can make sure our industry can take advantage of whatever fuel source is the most economic and avoid pitfalls experienced elsewhere,”.

It's thought that up to 20 per cent of buildings throughout Wales could be heated by biomass, but to do that would mean generating 5 terawatts of energy – and the best estimate is that home sourced timber can only provide 1.8 terawatts at present.

Which is why energy crops – willow, xanthus - have a vital role to play in enabling the country to reach its targets on renewables – and provide new income in the Welsh countryside.

There's a long history of using timber for heat in Germany – with tree cover of almost 40 per cent in Brandenburg, the region that partners Wales, Slovakia, Italy and Spain in Robinwood, has made use of its a valuable fuel resource for centuries.

The big housing blocks built during the area's time as part of the eastern bloc all used communal heating systems fired by brown coal – Brandenburg's only fossil fuel – or imported oil.

Now, with the German government's focus on renewable energy these heating systems are being switched over to biomass as engineers build on tradition with new high tech solutions to sustainable energy.

A new wood powered plant set up to serve New Haidamal, just south of Berlin, provides most of the heat and energy for the 280 homes. This completely new village has been built to replace Haidamal itself which has been pulled down to allow open cast brown coal extraction – Germany’s main fossil fuel source.

Much of the wood fuel used is the result of coal mining. Areas of forest are cleared from the mining sites to fuel the new power station – even the roots of the trees are used to get maximum energy from the forest.

And once the mining operation has been completed, the re-established land is giving the timber industry the opportunity to trial new fast-growing energy crops – particularly Black Locust.

Low rainfall – the regional average is around 50 ml a year compared to Wales’s 3.5 metres – means that willow and poplar don’t thrive.

Returns from the Black Locust have been good. Despite the low water levels the north American trees are producing high levels of biomass from the sandy soils – with cropping from three to five years providing new fuel, income for local people and clean carbon neutral energy.

“Despite the differences in our two regions, there are valuable lessons to be learned from our European partners,” said Kim Burnham, project manager of Robinwood Wales, the European Interreg 111c RFO (Regional Framework Operation) project – funded in Wales by the European Union and Welsh Assembly Government.

“The large community heat and light schemes are well ahead of what we have in Wales so far, they are working well and making a valuable contribution to Germany’s energy needs.

“But there have been mistakes along the way, and it just as valuable for us to learn from those as it is to copy the successes,” he added.

More details on Robinwood are available on the web-site: www.robin-wood.it or by contacting Robinwood, Wales: Kim Burnham – Tel: 08456 040845, e-mail – kim.burnham@forestry.gsi.gov.uk.

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Editor's note: Robinwood has given Wales its first opportunity to be a partner in one of the European Interreg 111c RFO (Regional Framework Operation) projects aimed at bringing partner countries together, fostering cross border work between academics, private business and the public sector. The Welsh part of the three and a half year project is worth 1 million Euros to Wales.

Robinwood is a cross-border European project aimed at identifying how forests, trees and timber across Europe can play a vital role in the revitalisation of rural communities through new business opportunities, flood prevention and wood fuel energy. It is hoped that it will also change political perception of the role woodlands can play in the social and economic future of rural communities and build new links between the partner countries involved.

Robinwood will promote the sustainable development of rural areas and overcome obstacles to progress by creating: a woodland chain process - territorial promotion, marketing - new techniques in forestry development - certification, policy changes, silviculture - hydrogeological improvements - models to prevent instability and reduce risks promotion of wood as a fuel source for energy - new management/technologies.

Analyses, sharing of experiences, the creation of new approaches, pilot projects, the preparation of operational and promotional plans and promotions will be used to achieve these. Direct results will be: workshops, meetings, studies, reports, master plans, promotion campaigns, events, maps, networks, partnerships, surveys and directives. Certain activities will be carried out by means of sub-projects assigned by means of open invitations to tender.