

Walkout at Norbord wood processing plants

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Workers at two wood panel plants are staging a walkout in protest at European subsidies which staff say is threatening their livelihood.

A total of 370 employees at Norbord's Inverness and Stirlingshire plants are taking part in the Europe-wide action.

They say subsidised biomass energy plants are pushing up the prices of their raw materials.

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The industry currently faces sustained buying power competition from the heavily subsidised energy sector.

Production was due to close down at the factories for one hour from 1130 BST.

Norbord employs more than 250 people at its Cowie plant and a further 120 at its sister site in Morayhill near Inverness.

Karl Morris, managing director of Norbord Europe, said it was vital for the business to back the European Day of Action in protest at a short-sighted policy that threatens the long-term sustainability of the industry which supports 8,700 jobs throughout the UK.

He added: "We are not anti-biomass and, indeed, as an industry we have pioneered the burning of our process-derived wood residues to generate heat and power, which is then fed back into our own manufacturing process.

"In fact Norbord is already the largest generator of renewable heat in the UK and this too is threatened."

The industry will also use the protest to highlight that current subsidies encourage electricity generators to burn virgin wood, which is disastrous for CO2 emissions.

Wood products are also a store of carbon and it is estimated that 60m tonnes of CO2 is stored in Europe's wood commodities.

Labour MP for Stirling, Anne McGuire, is supportive of Norbord's shutdown.

She said: "As both the local MP and chair of the all party parliamentary group for the wood panel industry in Westminster, I have long recognised that Norbord has been a significant presence in Stirling over many years and is one of the few industries of significant size operating in the local economy.

"Its factory at Cowie employs many local people and it also offers a much valued apprenticeship scheme.

"Whilst I appreciate the increase successive governments have made in biomass power as a result of the Renewables Obligation regime, I share Norbord's concerns at the huge increase in the number of planning applications for biomass power stations that generate electricity by burning wood."

Alan Roy, Unite branch chairman at the plant, said: "The fact that panel producers throughout the UK are shutting down their facilities for one hour today, shows unprecedented co-operation between businesses to highlight the seriousness of inaction on this issue.

"Our branch fully supports Norbord in its demonstration to government that this level of subsidisation cannot be allowed to continue."