

Bring back home heating with wood¹

Wood is a true renewable resource. When used for home heating, it displaces fossil fuels and electricity generation, especially at peak heating times which drive the “need” to build new power stations and power lines.

The potential of wood heating is ignored in MBIE’s electricity demand and generation scenarios.² MBIE’s “low carbon” scenario predicts that eight gas peaking stations will be needed by 2050. Transpower has calculated that if Huntly had not been retained, 600 megawatts of new peaking electricity generation would have been needed as early as 2019 to avoid electricity shortages!³

Home wood burning could replace those gas peakers; it is a key to a low carbon future. New Zealand’s households got 45% of their useful space and water heating energy from wood in 2005, according to HEEP, the Home Energy End-use Project, by BRANZ.⁴

This vital study has never been updated, but the proportion had fallen to 12% in 2015 according to MBIE’s recent submission to the International Energy Agency.

Two main factors have driven this decline in wood burning: -
- the extensive marketing and rapid rise of heat pumps, and
- the policy, “remove log burners”, directed by Ministry for the Environment to be implemented in polluted airsheds.

This “removal” policy is taken to the extreme in Christchurch, where even approved low-pollution wood burners are required to be removed once they reach 15 years of age – after which the householders have supposedly gotten their required return on investment. What a travesty of economic reasoning!

This one-sided policy appears to be driven by a conviction that wood smoke particles lead to early deaths which outweigh the health problems caused by cold houses. Yet problems of cold and mouldy houses feature in the news, more and more every winter.

Many people strongly prefer wood burning – for its ambience, affordability, resilience to blackouts, and indeed its direct reduction of climate-changing electricity emissions. In Government’s Warm Homes Clean Heat scheme, 70% of the recipients chose wood burners over heat pumps.⁵

Our national air quality policies should focus on setting appropriate heater combustion standards and education of wood heating users. Incomplete combustion arising from use of wet wood fuel is far more significant than the use of old but still efficient wood burners.

SEF concludes that wood burning has been actively suppressed, and it will take active measures to return it to its former role in New Zealand’s energy portfolio. Home wood burning will be an essential part of the systems that enable New Zealand to meet any reasonable carbon reduction target.

Lets focus on policies based on good science and education on home heating rather than easy-to-adopt policies that are not in the national interest nor individual interest of home owners.

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² <http://www.mbie.govt.nz/info-services/sectors-industries/energy/energy-data-modelling/modelling/electricity-demand-and-generation-scenarios/draft-edgs-2015/resolveuid/a142b44e883d4f1d823d041b02a97b89>

³ <https://www.systemoperator.co.nz/activites/current-projects/impact-thermal-generator-decommissioning>

⁴ http://www.branz.co.nz/cms_show_download.php?id=b1ab61dd06f50e83e6a184b29b68a989472502ed

⁵ from an OIA request to EECA