

Finland's muddy fight over super-polluting peat energy

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Tractors and peat fanning machineries are lined up in Taisto Raussi's peat fields in Sippola, Finland

On a barren expanse of bog in southeast Finland the size of 180 football pitches, Taisto Raussi's yellow harvester hoovers up a thin layer of rich

peat and deposits it in a heap, to be sold as fuel.

The Nordic country is by far the EU's largest burner of peat and is mired in a divisive battle over a source of energy which is more polluting than coal and can cause catastrophic environmental damage.

When Raussi set up business in 1973, "We were welcomed because there was an [energy crisis](#) in Finland," he tells AFP from his farm in Sippola, two hours from the capital Helsinki.

"Now it feels like everyone's against peat, there's only a few of us left who make our living from it."

Less than five percent of Finland's energy comes from peat, the equivalent of 1.5 million tonnes of oil every year, although this amount dwarfs the EU's other peat burners: Ireland, the Baltics, Sweden and Romania.

But it is blamed for 14 percent of Finland's entire greenhouse gas emissions.

Lawmakers' efforts to phase out peat for burning have stoked resentment between green-leaning urban populations and the rural communities where the industry supports up to 12,000 jobs.

Once known as "brown gold", peat is a dense organic material that builds up over thousands of years in wetlands and forest floors, covering almost a third of Finland's [surface area](#).



Snowchange has successfully rewilded not only Finland's Linnunsuo peat bog but 60 hectares of the surrounding water catchment area too

The world's northern peatlands are believed to store more carbon than the whole of the Amazon rainforest, making peat one of the most effective carbon sinks on the planet.

But these [greenhouse gases](#) are re-released when the peat is dug up or burnt, speeding up [climate change](#).

Dead in 10 years

Despite Finland's ambition to be carbon neutral by 2035, the centre-left

government has pledged only to halve peat use by 2030, a target environmental groups criticise as vague and lacklustre.

Market forces, however, now appear to be settling Finland's peat debate for good: EU carbon prices are heading for an all-time high and industries once reliant on peat are turning to cleaner energy sources.

"It's now very clear the change will happen at least five years earlier than the target set by our government," Pasi Rantonen, head of peat operations at state-owned energy producer Vapo, told AFP.

"We estimate that the fuel peat business is more or less dead in 10 years."



The peat-burning power station at Kuopio, Finland

Although the government has promised EU money to support the transition, "many companies will go bankrupt before that", Rantonen said.

Taisto Raussi, who also builds and sells peat-harvesting machinery, fears for the future of his 10 employees.

"Ten years ago all of our peat always sold, there wasn't enough to last through the winter," he said.

Now, towering mounds of peat covered in black plastic, unsold from last year, dot his land.

The self-taught inventor is pinning his hopes on his latest creation, for which he has received EU seed money—a device to produce the natural carbon-absorbing fertiliser, biochar.

Environmental legacy

The closure of the peat-burning industry will not mean an end to its environmental impact, its opponents say.

Tero Mustonen, a lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), accuses the peat industry of a terrible environmental legacy lasting 75 years "that destroyed and maimed so many of our rivers, lakes and wetlands."



Tero Mustonen a lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), accuses the peat industry of leaving a terrible environmental legacy in Finland

Ten years ago Mustonen noticed that fish in the Juhajoki river close to his village of Selkie, 70 kilometres (45 miles) from the Russian border, were dying en masse.

Harmful metals and other substances were leaching from the nearby Linnunsuo peat bog, operated by Vapo.

Mustonen and his wife, Kaisu, successfully campaigned to shut down the bog, which the company flooded and converted into a wetland.

"However it was not too fancy, so we stepped in and re-did all of those wetlands," Mustonen, who heads a "rewilding" organisation called Snowchange, told AFP.

Ten years and much intensive digging and shoring-up later, Snowchange has successfully rewilded not only the peat bog but 60 hectares of the surrounding water catchment area.

Some 195 bird species have returned and the trout-spawning areas sprung back to life, which is "pretty remarkable when you think that all of those fish were belly-up on the river", Mustonen said.

When AFP visits, a team of Snowchange scientists are monitoring gas emissions.



The success of the rewilding effort has led to the process being repeated at a further 23 degraded peatland sites across Finland, stretching up into the high Arctic

They pull out the occasional strip of black plastic from among the reeds, a reminder of the site's past life.

Vapo's Pasi Rantonen said stricter water controls on the firm's peat bogs means local pollution is no longer the problem it once was.

The success of the rewilding effort has led Snowchange to repeat the process on a further 23 degraded peatland sites across the country, stretching up into the high Arctic.

The cooperative now wants to rewild Finland's five million hectares of [peat](#) forests which were drained to boost tree growth, but became a further source of water pollution and greenhouse gases.

"Now that we are losing a lot of carbon sinks in Amazonia, Siberia and elsewhere, Finland matters," Mustonen said.

"We have these millions of hectares of degraded peatlands that have the potential to come back as a natural solution on climate."

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