

Updates on Bio-energy with Carbon Capture and Storage and Direct Air Capture (QUARTERLY #4, PART 2)

December 29, 2020

by Anja Chalmin

Burning biomass is a threat to climate (and no silver bullet) – The impact of BECCS using the Drax plant, Great Britain's biggest power plant, as an example

Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) is employed at the Drax Power Station in North Yorkshire in Great Britain. BECCS aims to burn biomass for energy, capture CO₂ from the exhaust gases and bury the captured CO₂ underground. In the case of Drax – Great Britain's biggest power station, generating 6 % of the British electricity – four of six units were converted to burn wood pellets instead of coal, with the goal *"to become the world's first negative emissions power station"*.^[1] Is this goal attainable?

The Drax plant burns about seven million tons of wood pellets annually. This is more wood than the entire UK produces every year. The majority of the biomass supply is imported from North America (~81 %), other origins are Brazilian, Estonian and Latvian forests. This means the biomass has to travel long distances to the station – via fossil-fuel powered means of transportation, such as container vessels, trucks and trains. Beside this the pellet production process is very energy-intensive, because wood as the raw material needs to be dried, grinded, palletized and packed – and again large amounts of fossil energy are consumed. This means, the above stated company goal is not attainable. It is true that trees as an energy source cannot emit more CO₂ than they have absorbed during growth, however, the entire BECCS process cannot be reduced to the combustion of wood (see figure 2).^[2] Regarding the absorption of CO₂ by trees, the European Academies' Science Advisory Council (EASAC) remarks: *"Far from being carbon neutral, the burning of forest biomass actually adds CO₂ to the atmosphere during the carbon payback period, which for the most relevant trees lies between 50 and 100 years"*^[3].

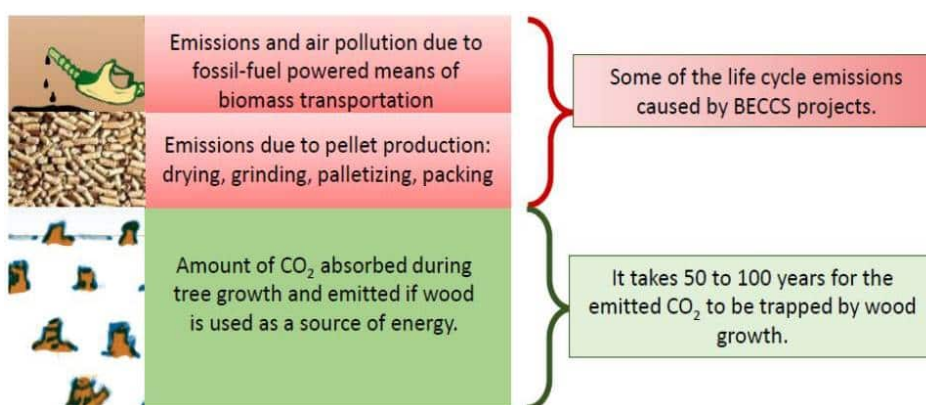


Figure 2: Burning biomass such as wood pellets is not carbon-neutral.

It is also for these reasons that the EASAC states that *"wood pellets are no silver bullet for providing electricity and heat without causing climate change"* and criticized that the Drax Station is heavily subsidised by the British government. Drax received £ 789 million in 2018 for burning biomass. In December 2020, British newspapers reported that the UK spent £ 1.9 billion on wood fuel subsidies in 2019, primarily to burn imported biomass at the Drax Station. In addition, the plant receives indirect subsidies, because it is exempted from paying carbon taxes.

This means the British tax payer funded (and probably still funds) the Drax Station with several million British Pounds per day.[4]

There are various reports that the logging for Drax leads to environmental problems. The campaign group 'Cut Carbon Not Forests', a coalition of UK- and US-based NGOs, reported that the subsidized UK biomass imports cause clear-cuts of mature and highly biodiverse hardwood forests and demands that *"the UK Government should immediately phase out all subsidies for large-scale biomass use for electricity production and redirect the savings to true clean and renewable energy sources like wind and solar"*. [5] A recent report published by the Estonian Fund for Nature and the Latvian Ornithological Society describes intensive negative clearcutting impacts on climate and wildlife in Estonian and Latvian forests – caused by wood pellet exports, mainly to the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands.[6]

Despite pollution and forest degradation the Drax Group continues to receive public funding. In addition to the subsidies and tax reductions, Drax also received grants worth millions to study the feasibility of carbon capture at its Drax Station. The latest test started in September 2020: Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Engineering installed its solvent-based CO₂ capture technology, aiming to test it during a 12-month pilot trial. In October, Drax selected the Australian company Worley for a pre-FEED (early front-end engineering and design) contract. The contract covers the plant layout, cost estimation and schedules for the first two CO₂ capture units at the power station. Once operational, these units are expected to capture around 8 million tonnes of CO₂ annually. The fate of the captured CO₂ is not yet fully clarified.[7]

While burning biomass is heavily subsidized in Great Britain, the advisory board of the Dutch government urged the Dutch government to phase out the use of biomass for generating electricity or heat, because burning biomass is wasteful and sustainably produced biomass too scarce. Importing wood pellets for the production of heat or electricity was not considered sustainable too, instead, biomass should be replaced with existing low-carbon and renewable alternatives.[8]

Extensive subsidies for, high energy demand of and attempts to greenwash Direct Air Capture (DAC)

DAC, a technology that aims to remove greenhouse gases, especially CO₂, from the earth's atmosphere on a large-scale, continues to make headlines with generous subsidies. Already in the previous years the sector received large private and public investments – many donors are associated with industries that produce or use fossil fuels on a large scale.[9]

In June 2020, **the British government** announced up to £ 100 million of funding to help develop DAC technologies in the UK. The competition is presently ongoing and will fund design studies looking into evolving DAC and other Greenhouse Gas Removal (GGR) technologies in the first phase. The second phase will be based on the most promising results from phase 1 and aims to *"pilot key components or further develop the design of the new direct air capture and other greenhouse gas removals technologies"*. [10]

In the US, the Trump administration had already announced US\$ 22 million in financing for commercializing DAC in March 2020. In September, the U.S. Department of Energy (US-DOE) has published a list of 18 projects that will benefit from this amount of funding. Most projects aim to develop new sorbents and filters to capture and release atmospheric CO₂. Electricore, a California-based company, aims to optimize the Swiss DAC process developed by the Swiss Climeworks AG. [11]

One of the **market access barriers for large-scale DAC** is that the CO₂-capture process is very energy intensive. It is very unlikely that new filters and sorbents will change this fact, because CO₂ is an inert gas (due to the complete oxidation of the carbon). The term 'inert' can also be described as chemically inactive or not very reactive. Due to this chemical property of CO₂, all forms of CO₂ – DAC are extremely energy- and therefore cost-intensive, because the CO₂ – capture process requires large amounts of energy, e.g., to release CO₂ from a filter or sorbent.

In the U.S., DAC projects can benefit from the 45Q credits– a tax provision to subsidize power plants and further industrial sites with DAC or CCS. If the captured CO₂ is used for EOR, the 45Q pays US\$ 35 per ton of captured CO₂. If the captured CO₂ is injected underground, into saline formations, the 45Q pays US\$ 50 per ton.[12]

Carbon Engineering Ltd. is a company headquartered in Squamish, B.C., Canada and founded by David Keith (Harvard University). Keith is also advocating for solar radiation management (SRM) and pushing to advance SRM through [open-air experiments](#). His company Carbon Engineering is closely tied to the fossil fuel sector and in 2020, the company's long list of fossil fuel dependent donors has grown once again. Since 2018, Carbon Engineering Ltd. has raised more than CAD 100 million from multiples investors, among them BHP, Chevron, Occidental Petroleum, Pale Blue Dot Energy, United Airlines and the tar sands billionaire N. Murray Edwards. Carbon Engineering is using a share of the extensive funding to construct an innovation center in Squamish, British Columbia, aiming to further improve its DAC as well as its patented fuels synthesis technology. The center will include a DAC and an AIR TO FUELS™ plant.[13]

In July 2020, **Carbon Engineering and Aerion** announced a joint synfuel project, based on Carbon Engineering's DAC and AIR TO FUELS™ technology. Aerion is based in the U.S., in Reno, Nevada and a developer of supersonic business jets. The companies signed a Memorandum of Understanding to explore the use of Carbon Engineering's synfuel as well as a potential synfuel plant for Aerion jets. The patented synfuel production process is based on the energy-consuming Fischer-Tropsch process. As for DAC, synfuel production based on CO₂ is very energy demanding, due to the chemical properties of CO₂ (as described above). Using captured CO₂-based fuels means, that

- large quantities of energy are required for the production process;
- the captured CO₂ is re-released back to the atmosphere within a short period of time – as soon the fuel is consumed.[14]

In September 2020, **Carbon Engineering and Pale Blue Dot Energy** signed a Memorandum of Understanding and announced a joint DAC project. The project partners aim to deploy a commercial DAC plant and consider building the plant close to the [Acorn CCS project](#) at the St. Fergus Gas Plant in Scotland, among other possible locations. The project partners hope to commission the DAC plant by 2026. The promise of government funding in the UK was a trigger for the partnership and the proposed location.[15]

Carbon Engineering Ltd. and Oxy Low Carbon Ventures LLC, a subsidiary of the international gas and oil company Occidental, announced their joint plan to design and construct the world's largest DAC facility in the United States already in 2019. In 2020, **Rusheen Capital** – a company with investments in CCUS and biofuels and a long list of business partners from the fossil fuel sector – joined as a new partner and, along with Oxy Low Carbon Ventures, **formed the company 1PointFive** as a mean to finance and deploy the announced DAC facility. The new DAC – plant will be located at an Occidental oil field in the Permian Basin in Texas and will require an area of ~40 hectares. The captured CO₂ will be used for EOR. Occidental employs CO₂ – EOR since 2010, but up to now, the captured CO₂ needed transport, e.g., via pipelines. Future plans include multiple DAC plants. In December 2020, **United Airlines** announced a multimillion-dollar investment in 1PointFive.[16]

Carbon Engineering's CO₂-capture process is based on a **potassium hydroxide solution** that acts as a chemical absorbent. Carbon Engineering describes the sorbent as "*non-toxic solution*".[17] According to ECHA, the European Chemical Agency, potassium hydroxide causes severe skin burns and is highly corrosive. ECHA also expects potassium hydroxide to have acute toxic effects on fish and invertebrates.[18] This means that leaks during the capture cycle as well as during transport and disposal would not be without danger for the biotic environment. Moreover, the company's goal of commercializing DAC would imply that large quantities of potassium hydroxide solution will be required. And not only the DAC process, but also the production of potassium hydroxide is energy consuming.[19] Carbon Engineering seems not to be aware of the risks involved in handling potassium hydroxide or the risks are intentionally concealed (by those who want the technology financed)?

The impression that geoengineering technology is being greenwashed and its environmental risks and effects are being downplayed solidifies when reading further: On its website, 1PointFive declares: "*By implementing Carbon Engineering's DAC facilities in the United States at scale, we intend to showcase the critical role this technology can play in reducing the global carbon footprint*". In addition, Occidental is described as a "*carbon manager*", storing millions of tons of CO₂ by Enhanced Oil Recovery (EOR) and Carbon Engineering claims "*that CO₂ captured at the facility will be permanently, safely and securely stored deep underground in geological formations by Occidental*".[20] For the following facts contradict these claims:

- EOR was developed by the oil industry to recover otherwise inaccessible oil by pumping pressurized CO₂ into oil reservoirs or by pumping pressurized CO₂ into declining oil wells to increase output. The reasons for the

development of the EOR process were strictly economic. EOR is a process that leads to the extraction and combustion of more fossil fuels and thus more carbon.[21]

- Oil industry estimated that about 30 percent of the CO₂ injected for EOR will be directly emitted back into the atmosphere.[22]
- The DAC capture process is very energy-intensive. To capture only one million tons of CO₂ annually, as announced, the Carbon Engineering capture process requires 1.300 million kWh. This amount of energy is sufficient to cover the energy needs for the nearly 20,000 inhabitants of Squamish, the Canadian town where Carbon Engineering is headquartered, for almost 5 years.[23]

The Swiss **Climeworks AG** raised more than € 90 million in its 2020 funding round. Since its foundation, more than € 135 million in public and private grants became publicly known.[24] The Climeworks DAC – technology is trialed in the **European CarbFix project**, at Reykjavik Energy's Hellisheidi heat and power plant, located in a geothermal area nearby Reykjavik. End of 2019, CarbFix announced plans to double the amount of CO₂ and H₂S captured at Hellisheidi plant and injected underground in the nearby injection sites. In December 2020, Climeworks started constructing a larger DAC plant. The new plant has been named Orca, will be based close to the Hellisheidi plant and is expected to capture 0,004 million tonnes of CO₂ annually, starting in 2021.[25] To capture 4.000 tonnes of CO₂ annually, the Climeworks capture process requires up to 10 million kWh of thermal energy and ~2,4 million kWh of thermal energy. This amount of energy is sufficient to cover the energy needs for the ~ 11,000 inhabitants in Hinwil, the Swiss place where the Climeworks AG is headquartered, for about two months.[26]

ENDNOTES

[1] Drax (2019) *Carbon dioxide now being captured in first of its kind BECCS pilot*, https://www.drax.com/press_release/world-first-co2-beccs-ccus/; ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Drax Project*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/drax-project/>

[2] Drax (2020) *Sourcing sustainable biomass*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://www.drax.com/sustainability/sourcing-sustainable-biomass/>; BBC (2019) *Climate change: UK carbon capture project begins*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-47163840>; ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Drax Project*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/drax-project/>

[3] EASAC (2019) *Leading Scientists Warn: Wood Pellets Threat to Climate – “No Silver Pellet”*, <https://easac.eu/media-room/press-releases/details/leading-scientists-warn-wood-pellets-threat-to-climate-no-silver-pellet/>

[4] Norton et al. (2019) *Serious mismatches continue between science and policy in forest bioenergy*. In: GCB Bioenergy; 11: 1256– 1263, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcbb.12643>; EASAC (2019) *Leading Scientists Warn: Wood Pellets Threat to Climate – “No Silver Pellet”*, <https://easac.eu/media-room/press-releases/details/leading-scientists-warn-wood-pellets-threat-to-climate-no-silver-pellet/>; Rudgard (2020) *Government accused of ‘hypocrisy’ over climate goals as UK becomes top spender on wood chip subsidies*, in The Telegraph, published: 10. December 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/environment/2020/12/10/government-accused-hypocrisy-climate-goals-uk-becomes-to-p-spender/>; ReNews (2020) *UK urged to redirect biomass subsidies to wind and solar*, published: 20. November 2020, <https://renews.biz/64642/uk-urged-to-redirect-biomass-subsidies-to-wind-and-solar/>; Natural Resources Defense Council (2020) *Cut Carbon Not Forests: Hard-Hitting Campaign Urges UK Policymakers to Build a True Clean Energy Economy and End Dirty Biomass Subsidies*, published: 22. June 2020, <https://www.nrdc.org/media/2020/200618>

[5] Cut Carbon Not Forests (2020) *Update: BURNOUT EU Clean Energy Policies Lead to Forest Destruction*, https://www.cutcarbonnotforests.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-Update_BURNOUT_EU-Clean-Energy-Policies-Lead-to-Forest-Destruction.pdf, <https://www.cutcarbonnotforests.org/>

[6] Estonian fund for Nature & Latvian Ornithological Society (2020) *Hidden inside a wood pellet. Intensive logging impacts in Estonian and Latvian forests*, published: December 2020, <https://elfond.ee/biomassreport>, https://media.voog.com/0000/0037/1265/files/Biomass_report_ENG%20_2020.pdf; biofuelwatch (2020) *New report by NGOs in Estonia and Latvia shows wood pellets burned by Drax Power Station linked to forest degradation in their countries*,

<https://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2020/new-report-by-ngos-in-estonia-and-latvia-shows-wood-pellets-burned-by-dra-x-power-station-linked-to-forest-degradation-in-their-countries/>

[7] ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Drax Project*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/drax-project/>; Doyle (2020) *Second carbon capture pilot to start at Drax*, in: The Chemical Engineer, published: 24. June 2020, <https://www.thechemicalengineer.com/news/second-carbon-capture-pilot-to-start-at-drax/>; Doyle (2020) *Worley awarded contract for Drax BECCS power station*, in: The Chemical Engineer, published: 2. October 2020, <https://www.thechemicalengineer.com/news/worley-awarded-contract-for-drax-beccs-power-station/>

[8] Janssen (2020) *The Dutch have decided: Burning biomass is not sustainable*, in Euractiv, published: 21. July 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/biomass/news/the-dutch-have-decided-burning-biomass-is-not-sustainable/>; SER (2020) *Biomassa in balans. Een duurzaamheidskader voor*

hoogwaardige inzet van biograndstoffen., published in July 2020, <https://www.ser.nl/-/media/ser/downloads/adviezen/2020/biomassa-in-balans.pdf>

[9] ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Direct Air Capture*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/>

[10] UK Government (2020) *Direct Air Capture and other Greenhouse Gas Removal technologies competition*, accessed: 17. December 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/direct-air-capture-and-other-greenhouse-gas-removal-technologies-competition?utm_source=27a154d2-b23a-4187-b309-f1e0abc69aa7&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=weekly

[11] U.S.-Department of Energy (2020) *Department of Energy to Provide \$22 Million for Research on Capturing Carbon Dioxide from Air*, published: 30. March 2020, <https://www.energy.gov/articles/department-energy-provide-22-million-research-capturing-carbon-dioxide-air>; U.S.-Department of Energy (2020) *FOA 2187 and FOA 2188 Project Selections*, published: 1. September 2020, <https://www.energy.gov/fe/articles/foa-2187-and-foa-2188-project-selections>

[12] Smith (2020) *Congress warms to the idea of sucking carbon directly from the air and storing it in soil*, in: Washington Examiner, published: 17. 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/energy/congress-warms-to-the-idea-of-sucking-carbon-directly-from-the-air-and-storing-it-in-soil>

[13] ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Carbon Engineering*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbon-engineering/>; Carbon Engineering (2020) *CE Breaks Ground at Direct Air Capture Innovation Centre*, published: 11. June 2020, <https://carbonengineering.com/news-updates/innovation-centre/>; Carbon Engineering (2020) *AIR TO FUELS™*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://carbonengineering.com/air-to-fuels/>

[14] ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Carbon Engineering & Aerion*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbon-engineering-aerion>; Chalmin (2020) *An introduction to CCUS proposals and their viability*, in: Geonengineering Monitor, published: 15. July 2020, <https://www.geoengineeringmonitor.org/2020/07/can-captured-carbon-be-put-to-use/>

[15] ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Carbon Engineering & Pale Blue Dot Energy*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbon-engineering-pale-blue-dot-energy/>; Pale Blue Dot Energy (2020) *Pale Blue Dot Energy and Carbon Engineering create partnership to deploy Direct Air Capture in the UK*, published: 17. September 2020, <https://pale-blu.com/2020/09/17/pale-blue-dot-energy-and-carbon-engineering-create-partnership-to-deploy-direct-air-capture-in-the-uk/>; Lammey (2020) *Tech for sucking CO2 out of the air could be coming to Aberdeenshire*, in: Energy Voice, published: 17. September 2020, <https://www.energyvoice.com/renewables-energy-transition/265894/direct-air-capture-aberdeenshire/>

[16] ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Carbon Engineering & Oxy Low Carbon Ventures*,

<https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbon-engineering-oxy-low-carbon-ventures/>; 1PointFive (2020) *Partnering for Change*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://www.1pointfive.com/about>; Carbon Engineering (2020) *Carbon Engineering doubling size of direct air capture plant in Permian Basin*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://www.jwnenergy.com/article/2019/9/19/carbon-engineering-doubling-size-direct-air-captur/>; Rusheen (2020) *Rusheen Capital Management*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://www.rusheen.com/#approach>; United Airlines (2020) *United Adopts Tax Benefits Preservation Plan To Protect Valuable Tax Assets*, published: 4. December 2020, <https://hub.united.com/2020-12-04-united-adopts-tax-benefits-preservation-plan-to-protect-valuable-tax-assets-2649262383.html>

[17] Carbon Engineering (2020) *Our Technology*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://carbonengineering.com/our-technology/>; ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Carbon Engineering*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbon-engineering/>

[18] ECHA (2020) *Potassium hydroxide – Substance Infocard*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://echa.europa.eu/de/substance-information/-/substanceinfo/100.013.802>; ECHA (2020) *Potassium hydroxide – Ecotoxicological information*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://echa.europa.eu/de/registration-dossier/-/registered-dossier/15804/6/2/1>

[19] Realmonte, et al. (2019) *An inter-model assessment of the role of direct air capture in deep mitigation pathways*, in *Nat Commun* 10, 3277, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-10842-5>; ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Carbon Engineering*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbon-engineering/>

[20] 1PointFive (2020) *Partnering for Change*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://www.1pointfive.com/about>; Carbon Engineering (2020) *Oxy Low Carbon Ventures, Rusheen Capital Management create development company 1PointFive to deploy Carbon Engineering's Direct Air Capture technology*, published: 19. August 2020, <https://carbonengineering.com/news-updates/new-development-company-1pointfive-formed/>

[21] Heidug, et al. (2015) *Storing CO₂ through Enhanced Oil Recovery*, International Energy Agency, https://nachhaltigwirtschaften.at/resources/iea_pdf/reports/iea_ghg_storing_co2_trough_enhanced_oil_recovery.pdf

[22] Ernsting & Munnion (2015) *Last ditch climate option of wishful thinking? Bioenergy with carbon capture and storage*, Biofuelwatch, <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/2015/beccs-report/>

[23] WorldData (2020) *Energy consumption in Canada*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://www.worlddata.info/america/canada/energy-consumption.php> (calculation based on 13,892 kWh per capita and year); ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Carbon Engineering*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbon-engineering/>

[24] ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Climeworks AG*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/climeworks-ag/>

[25] ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: CarbFix / GECO-project site: Hellisheidi power plant*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbfix-geco-project-site-hellisheidi-power-plant/>; ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: CarbFix / GECO-project site: CarbFix / CarbFix 2*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/carbfix-carbfix-2/>

[26] WorldData (2020) *Energy consumption in Switzerland*, accessed: 17. December 2020, <https://www.worlddata.info/europe/switzerland/energy-consumption.php> (calculation based on 6,818 kWh per capita and year); ETC Group and Heinrich Böll Foundation (2020) *Geoengineering Map: Climeworks AG*, <https://map.geoengineeringmonitor.org/Carbon-Cioxide-Removal/climeworks-ag/>