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Soaring oil prices give wood-fuel a new edge

The people of Cardiff have turned their back on the log fire ! Just seven per cent of the people in the capital use the traditional fuel. But wildly fluctuating oil prices could help make wood – the fuel of the past – the fuel of the future, according to a Welsh-based international forestry project.

Robinwood, the ground-breaking Forestry Commission Wales Interreg III C project, which aims to show how best forestry practices can help provide rural jobs and new income, says latest technology makes wood a real alternative to fossil fuels.

But the wood fuel industry has a tough job on its hands. According to a public opinion poll sponsored by the project just 11 per cent of people across Wales use wood for heat. Cardiff and the south east reported the lowest use of wood.

40 per cent of the people surveyed said they were happy with their present heating system – with another 23 per saying that wood wouldn't be practical for their property.

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2/ Wood the fuel of the future

“But the results do offer significant opportunities to the wood-fuel sector,” said Robinwood’s Paul Finch. “60 per cent of the people of Wales are unhappy with their present fuel and more than 70 per cent could be using wood instead.

“What is certain is that fossil fuels are not going to get any cheaper, we have reached peak oil flow, and from now on it is going to be much more expensive to produce.”

Already wood-powered heat and light systems across Wales are proving that sustainable, locally produced fuel can provide a fuss-free alternative to currently conventional sources.

Hospitals, old people’s homes – even the new Welsh Assembly Government building in Cardiff – are all being heated by timber.

“Traditional log fires still have a place in the hearths of Wales, but the new companies providing wood energy are installing highly efficient boilers which can be fuelled by Welsh wood.

“The companies themselves do all the work, sourcing the fuel, ensuring delivery, servicing the equipment – all the business or homeowner has to do is pay for the energy they use in the same way they do now,” said Paul.

Robinwood – which includes partners from Italy, Spain, Germany, Poland, Slovakia and Wales – is working with the wood fuel industry in Wales to promote the environment friendly fuel source.

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“It is a challenge for us, most people have never even considered wood as an alternative fuel, what we have to do is convince people and make them aware of what is available now,” he added.

The team is working with Welsh business, forestry specialists in the private and public sectors and others, co-ordinating surveys and reports put together by experts including universities, timber and energy companies and others. Brandenburg, Germany; Liguria, northern Italy; Murcia, southern Spain; Pomorskie, Poland, Wales and Eastern Slovakia have worked in close collaboration on the project and will continue exchanging details of their own experiences and working together on new initiatives.

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Editor's notes: 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. The Welsh strand of the work pulls together information on how forests in at least three of the countries are looked after now, and how best methods can be used and developed across all six regions.

Robinwood Wood for Fuel all-Wales survey results:

11 per cent use wood as a fuel source

24 per cent in North Wales

12 per cent in Mid/West

10 per cent in West/South

2 per cent in the Valleys

7 per cent in Cardiff/South/East

18 per cent believe wood provides renewable energy and those living in the Valleys, south, west and mid Wales are less likely to have seen or read about wood for fuel or short rotation coppice.