

THE "PRACTICALITY" REALITYCHECK

Practicalities of Making a Living Growing Carbon-Friendly Crops

“Can you make a living at it?”

Presented by: Jamie Rickerby, Willow Energy
A farmer, contractor and innovator, who has been involved in willow biomass for 13 years!



Short Rotation Coppice (SRC)

Short Rotation Coppice Willow is not like growing wheat or maize. We plant it once using cuttings, and it stays in the ground for 25 years. It grows rapidly, sequestering carbon, and every three years we harvest it at the base. It springs back to life the following spring. It is a brilliantly efficient system of continuous carbon capture, but that 25 -year lifecycle creates an economic risk profile completely different from standard arable farming.



The Logistics Reality



To make a living, you must handle the volume mismatch. We harvest 1,000 tonnes in a long weekend, yet a boiler burns just 50 tonnes a week. That leaves 100s tonnes sitting in inventory for months. The critical question policy ignores is: who finances that storage and handling?

Then there is the moisture. Harvesting in winter means 50% water content, so half of every truckload is just water. This must be dried immediately to prevent rotting. Current models assume woodchip flows like dry gas; it doesn't.



The Economic Reality



"Harvesters are a £400,000 investment. Diesel and labour costs have soared, yet woodchip value has flatlined. We are trying to build a high-tech industry on a low-margin price. You cannot expect farmers to take a 20-year risk when costs skyrocket but income stagnates. If the margin isn't there, the carbon capture never happens."



We built the Hardware



Biomass Feedstock Innovation Programme

It's not for lack of trying. Through the BFIP, we built the hardware. We developed a tracked harvesting system. We solved the technical barriers to harvesting on wet, marginal land. We built robotic autonomous machines with the potential to plant 1,000 hectares of willow. But hardware is useless without the 'software' of a functioning market.



The Missing Middle



England Woodland Creation

On paper, it looks great: £10,000 a hectare and 15 years of payments. Yet, planting targets are missed every single year. Why? Because farmers are terrified of permanence. Locking land up forever devalues the farm.



Willow is the 'Missing Middle.'

It's a crop that captures carbon like a tree but offers the flexibility of arable farming. It is the perfect bridge. But because it doesn't fit neatly into either box, it feels ignored by policy completely. The 'practicality' is that farmers will always choose the easy SFI money over the unsupported risk of willow.

Sustainable Farming Incentive

This is where all the attention is right now. Planting bird seed mixes for an annual payment. It's easy money, it's flexible, and you can plough it up in a few years. It's a massive distraction from long-term carbon crops.



Trees and Crops: Different Tools for Different Jobs



The Framework must distinguish between two essential jobs: Carbon Storage, where trees lock carbon away, and Carbon Displacement, where energy crops replace fossil fuels. Applying 'Tree rules' to 'Energy Crops' is dangerous because it blocks the harvest. We must recognise that harvesting isn't a loss; it is the activation of displacement. A good framework values both the standing tree and the energy it creates.

Biomass Policy Timeline

"We are stuck in a loop of 'Endless Analysis' always one report away from action. While we wait for the perfect policy, the farmers are walking away!"

To understand why, look at the timeline. In 2012, the Bioenergy Strategy promised a golden age. 14 years later, we begin 2026 with another Biomass Research Programme Launch and Biomass Sustainability Framework Consultation!

2012
UK Bioenergy Strategy launched

2014
Consultation on Biomass Sustainability

2021
Biomass Policy Statement

2021
Role of Biomass in Achieving Net Zero

2023
Biomass Strategy established

2026
Biomass Research Programme Launch

2026
Common biomass sustainability framework consultation

We Are Pivoting

So, how do I make a living while the UK debates its energy framework? By pivoting away from burning biomass entirely. We are moving into higher value markets that solve immediate problems. We are exploring willow leaf fodder to actively reduce methane emissions in cattle, and processing woodchip into low-ammonia animal bedding. We are directing harvests into peat-free compost to displace extraction. And even targeting the cosmetics sector to supply high-value natural extracts. We are no longer waiting for an energy contract.



Sustainability Starts with Solvency

You cannot sustain a business on consultation documents. There is a real danger that while we strive for the 'perfect' data, actual deployment is drifting towards the 2030s. We do not have that time. We have the experience, the willow genetics, and the world-leading technology sitting in the shed ready to go. But unless we prioritise immediate market action over endless reporting, there will be no industry left to plant the crop when the policy finally arrives.

