

Business

Finland's muddy fight over super-polluting peat energy

Nordic country is by far the EU's largest burner of peat

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 tons 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.

The world's northern peatlands are believed to store more carbon than the whole of the Ama-

zon 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 center-left government has pledged only to halve peat use by 2030, a target environmental groups criticize as vague and lackluster. 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." 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 re-



SIPPOLA, Finland: Tractors and peat farming machinery are lined up in Taisto Raussi's peat fields on Sept 22, 2020. — AFP

ceived EU seed money - a device to produce the natural carbon-absorbing fertilizer, 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". Ten years ago Mustonen noticed

that fish in the Juhajoki river close to his village of Selkie, 70 km 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" organization called Snowchange, told AFP. — AFP

News in brief

US regulators fine GE

WASHINGTON: US markets regulators on Wednesday hit General Electric with a \$200 million fine for misleading investors about results in its power and insurance businesses. "Investors are entitled to an accurate picture of a company's material operating results," said Stephanie Avakian, director of enforcement and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). "GE's repeated disclosure failures across multiple businesses materially misled investors about how it was generating reported earnings and cash growth as well as latent risks in its insurance business." —AFP

Uber to sell air taxi unit

SANTA CRUZ: Uber will sell off its air transport unit to flying taxi maker Joby Aviation, the company said, as it streamlines operations to navigate a ride-share market scuttled by the pandemic. The deal will see Joby acquire Uber expertise and software, and able to offer its all-electric, vertical take-off and landing passenger aircraft on the ride-hailing giant's app. While financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, they include Uber investing \$75 million into Santa Cruz-based Joby, which has said it hopes to have its flying taxis in operation as early as 2023. — AFP

DoorDash couriers racing to survive

MARINA DEL REY, California: Investors gorged on food delivery service DoorDash's US stock market debut Wednesday, but thousands of its couriers struggle to earn minimal wage and juggle working for multiple app services to get by, according to one Los Angeles worker. Driving in wealthy Marina del Rey, Devon Gutekunst scrolled through the DoorDash app and swiftly dismissed a notification offering a job that wouldn't begin to pay the bills.

"\$5.50 for 4.6 miles... which would be 30 minutes," he told AFP. "\$11 an hour, that is an automatic decline. Not enough, right?" California's minimum wage is \$15 an hour, and Gutekunst's policy is to "never accept anything less than that". "My personal minimum is \$18 an hour. I often make more than that, because I have a strategy," he explained.

Gutekunst's plan is simple - stay local, and turn down offers that require leaving his seaside stretch and trekking across sprawling and notoriously traffic-prone Los Angeles. He also simultaneously checks DoorDash's rival apps, including Grubhub, Uber Eats and Postmates, keeping a watchful eye out for the best prospects. "You can't make a living on DoorDash alone," said Gutekunst. "To make decent money... you really have to juggle, to play with all the offers to make your living."

As a result, his DoorDash delivery acceptance rate was only 12 percent on Wednesday, which is "very high" for him. "A lot of



NEW YORK: DoorDash delivery person rides their bike on Church Avenue in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn on Dec 4, 2020. — AFP

times it's two percent." Gutekunst said he made "good money" during California's summer COVID peak from May to August, when there was much more demand as residents stayed home. Despite the recent return to "stay-at-home" orders in Los Angeles, it is "a little slower now". "Or the other possibility is the market is just flooded with too many drivers, so there are not as many orders and they give you less payment." — AFP