Uncertainty remains despite sustainability drive

London, 14 May (Argus) — The biomass sector is close to establishing common standards for the sustainability of its supplies, with a first draft expected by the end of June. But it remains unclear whether those criteria will satisfy biomass sceptics, in particular policy makers in the key market of the Netherlands.

The Sustainable Biomass Partnership (SBP) is working at "breakneck speed" to get board approval on its criteria by the end of June, SBP head Peter Wilson said at European biomass association Aebiom's conference in Brussels held on 12-13 May. A short consultation period will follow, with a useable first version available later in the summer, he said.

The criteria should go some way to standardising the approach to sustainability of Europe's end-users. But in the Netherlands, non-governmental organisations continue to press for forestry-level assurances that will be beyond the scope of the SBP, which looks only as far up the supply chain as the pellet mill — which is unrealistic, suppliers say.

Talks in the country are continuing between utilities and environmental groups, as they try to find a consensus that will allow the Dutch energy agreement to take effect and enable power output of up to 25 PJ/yr from biomass co-fired alongside coal — equivalent to around 3.5mn t/yr of biomass consumption — under the SDE+ subsidy scheme. The government hopes the framework could be in place by ministerial mandate in time to allow new co-firing schemes to start next year, according to the Dutch environment and infrastructure ministry biomass policy officer Rob Cornelissen.

Certification at forest level, such as under the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) scheme, would be impractical, pellet producers and suppliers say. North American producers work with raw materials from scores of small landowners, they say.

"You would not be getting North American pellets if they have to be certified by FSC," Canadian wood pellet association head Gordon Murray said. "It seems to me this whole thing is a waste of time, you are not going to get any pellets from anybody."

But alternatives remain if a deadlock needs to be broken, Cornelissen said. The SBP terms could yet form the foundation for the country's sustainability deal, he said. And the government would be able to step in if a consensus is not found — although that would inevitably be a longer process, bringing more delays.