

Save the „Hambacher Forst“ – Stop coal mining!



Dirk Jansen

Impacts of lignite mining in the Rhineland

Open-pit lignite mining in the Rhineland is a stark example of environmental destruction and a major contribution to the climate crisis.

The Rhenish lignite mining area is the number one carbon polluting region in Europe. In 2017, RWE, a major German electricity producer, extracted 90 million tons of lignite, about 39 million tons in the Hambach open-pit mine alone.

Since 1978, lignite – or brown coal – mining in Hambach has been destroying the environment and the climate. Of all energy sources, lignite damages the climate the most. The RWE power plant “Neurath”, for instance, produces an annual 30 million tons of CO₂, thereby making it the dirtiest powerplant in Germany and the second dirtiest in Europe. If RWE is not stopped, it will continue mining an overall 1,3 billion tons of lignite in the Hambach open-cast lignite pit until 2045.

Open-cast lignite mining not only threatens the climate, but also the forest “Hambacher Forst”, which is considered the last and largest natural forest area in the Lower Rhineland. RWE has been and wants to continue – clearing up the forest

to make profits from excavating the brown coal lying beneath.

The excavation of coal also has far-reaching consequences for the groundwater balance. In order to keep the pit dry, a large-scale lowering of the groundwater has to be carried out. Consequentially, rivers and wetlands are drying up.

Furthermore, thousands of people are being displaced and forced to leave their homes. Currently, Kerpen-Manheim, a township with formerly almost 1,700 inhabitants, is being resettled; Merzenich-Morschenich, a village with about 500 inhabitants, is doomed to be demolished by 2023 to make way for the open-cast coal mine Hambach.



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“Hambacher Forst” – An invaluable habitat

The forest “Hambacher Forst” is one of the last so-called “Bürgewälder”. „Bürgewälder”, were first mentioned in the 10th century by emperor Otto II. and are semi-natural forests whose development have hardly been disrupted since the reforestation after the ice age.

Since the start of the mining of coal in 1978, however, the size of the „Hambacher Forest” was reduced from 41 square kilometres to around 6 km² today. Nonetheless, even though the largest part of the forest already fell victim to mining, the “Hambacher Forst” is still home to the largest oak-hornbeam woodland within the Atlantic biogeographical region of Germany. The woodland – with its lily of the valley, common oak and hornbeam populations – corresponds to habitat type 9160 of annex I of the Habitats Directive and should therefore be strictly protected. All other populations of this habitat type officially registered by the German federal states to the EU commission are smaller in proportion than the „Hambacher Forst”. Thus, every square meter of it remaining, needs to be protected.

The “Hambacher Forst” is a living space and retreat for rare animals, protected



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under EU law, such as the mottled woodpecker, the spring frog or the dormouse. Moreover, around 100 species of birds can still be found here.

The forest also offers a refuge for bats: ten different species of bats have been accounted for, and another three species are suspected to live there.

With its investigations, the „Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland“ (BUND – Friends of the Earth Germany) was able to shed a light on the importance of the „Hambacher Forst“ as a habitat for the Bechstein's bat (*Myotis bechsteinii*), which is strictly protected according to annex II and IV of the Habitats Directive. In North Rhine-Westphalia this species is "critically endangered". The few populations left can be found in the low mountain ranges and its borders. Hardly any populations are proven on the plains. In the whole Lower Rhine region, only three maternity roosts of the Bechstein's bat are known. The biggest two of them in the "Hambacher Forst".

According to RWE, it is sufficient to afford rest land in the vicinity of the open pit, to make up for the habitats destroyed. But it will take decades for these areas to reach some level of – but never an equal level of – biotope quality. For the bats, this will be too late.

BUND's engagement for the „Hambacher Forst“

BUND has been vigorously fighting lignite mining and has been supporting the protection of the "Hambacher Forst" for numerous years. Thus far, our legal complaints were rejected for technical reasons. But now our chances have considerably improved. Because of the development of EU case law, the pursuance of new legal paths holds better prospects in store.

BUND has filed a law suit against the permit for the continuation of the mine Hambach from 2020 to 2030. This suit is justified by the violations against European environmental law (FFH Directive) and by the missing environmental impact assessment for the project. In addition, protected animals such as the Bechstein bat, offer legal prospects based on the species protection laws. If we win at court, we can save another 924 hectare from the coal excavators, one third of which is part of the invaluable forest habitat.

To increase the chances against the progression of open-cast mining, BUND bought a plot of land in the planned open pit field back in 1997. By 2020, RWE is planning to reach that area. For as long as we keep our ownership, RWE's plans are spoiled. Because we are holding on

to the land, RWE now tries to expropriate us, which we, in turn, will try our utmost to avoid – by all legal means possible. If BUND is successful, we can save another 450 hectare from RWE-excavators, an important buffer zone between the existing mine and the other remaining old-growth forest "Steinheide".

In October 2018 we succeeded in a first court case. The logging in the forest was stopped.

BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany) will continue to protect the environment and the climate – regionally – nationally and internationally – as part of the world's largest environmental grassroots network (Friends of the Earth International).

More BUND-Information (in German)

„Hambacher Forst“:
www.bund-nrw.de/hambach

Coal in Germany
www.bund.net/kohle

Climate Policy in Germany
www.bund.net/klimawandel



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