

Are biomass guidelines sufficient to protect our natural resources? Who will protect our communities and health?

What Should Be Done?

Do nothing... stop investing in woody biomass production and conversion immediately!

Withdraw public financial support for investment in woody biomass development.

Retract any support for biomass development from the U.S. Farm Bill and Energy Independence and Security Acts.

Policy making in regards to renewable energy should follow recent scientific scholarship that shows biomass is not sustainable.

Create incentives for industry to develop truly clean and green energy – solar and wind and other nonpolluting sources of energy.

Use short term renewable forms of biomass rather than forests.

On the Other Hand ...

Woody biomass IS carbon neutral, and therefore sustainable.

Woody biomass is one of the best solutions to our energy needs. It may not be perfect, but we must make changes immediately. It can buy us time as we concurrently engage in the science to improve biomass so one day we do achieve truly renewable energy.

Sustainable production practices can assure that human health is not at risk.

Approach 3 Unrealistic Sources

Supporters of the final approach argue that woody biomass is the wrong path. They have serious concerns that focus on three primary areas: the environment, human health, and economic development. They agree that we must confront our critical energy challenges that lie ahead, but where others see opportunity in woody biomass, they see peril.

They are concerned that woody biomass is not as 'renewable' as it is touted. Biomass is destructive to the forests which we are asking to supply our growing energy demands. The increasing appetite for timber will put pressure on loggers to aggressively cut prime forestland. Biomass material is expected to come from private land and state and federal forests. State and federal forests are a public good, and should not be given to investors looking to exploit it for short term profit.

The forest is not merely a resource for humans to exploit but it is a delicate ecological system that nurtures many living organisms. A number of organisms depend on the insects, fungi and small mammals that make their home on the forest floor. Disruption to this system will wreak havoc on this ecological balance in ways we cannot predict. For example, some say that not only will loggers take the 'slash' or residual matter that is now left in the forest after logging, but once new biomass facilities are open for business, entire trees will be burnt for energy as well. This residual material is vital to maintaining the ecological balance of the forest. It provides rich nutrients to the environment that support the biodiversity of the forest. This environment is responsible for helping to regenerate this natural resource.

Woody Biomass is Not 'Green'

Burning biomass also is not 'carbon neutral', according to recent scientific studies. Like coal, burning biomass releases more carbon into the air, further hampering our ability to address global climate change. Other practices and technologies, such as wind, solar and energy efficiency should first be implemented.

Sourcing Biomass

In many cases, advocates of woody biomass claim that plants will draw from a 50-75 mile radius to supply their needs. Proponents of this approach counter that there is insufficient biomass material to serve the appetite for wood and little coordination between the multiple proposed biomass projects in the region. In the near future wood shortages would be commonplace, putting pressure on other woods needs, such as paper mills and people who heat their homes with wood. Overall, biomass energy development creates incentives for cutting and burning the whole, standing trees rather than merely collecting the residual matter, as there is not near enough mill waste to economically supply new biomass plants and bioenergy crops are not yet available.

The forest also provides recreational opportunities for citizens who enjoy hunting, hiking, horseback riding, snowmobiling and other activities that enhance tourism development. More competition for wood means less availability for the forest for recreation and relaxation. These are serious threats to a state whose second largest economic sector is tourism. Smelling smokestacks and sharing the road with logging trucks are typically not high on tourists' agendas.

Producing fuel crops such as switchgrass or willow is also unsustainable. It continues down the road to monoculture – encouraging farmers to produce the highest value crops. Some farmers will no doubt put fallow land that serves vital ecological functions back into production.

Risks to Health

Proponents of this approach also claim that woody biomass presents an unacceptable health risk. Anything that is burned does not truly qualify as renewable energy. Incineration pollutes air and waterways and sickens local residents. Technological fixes such as 'scrubbers' (i.e., filters) placed on smokestacks do not completely remove all pollution from the air. What is removed, however, ends up in landfills and eventually our ground and waterways, and our bodies. Support for this position comes from the American Lung Association and others. Children with asthma are particularly susceptible to respiratory problems due to air particulates.

The use of valuable land for fuel crops rather than food is also a challenge to our community's food security. Land should be used to feed people, not automobiles. Using land for fuel crops may lead to higher food prices and even food insecurity in some communities. Land used as fuel is unsustainable. We must prioritize the use of this natural resource for food.

No New Jobs

Proponents of Approach 3 also believe that jobs will not be created that can aid to the economic development of communities. In most cases less than 30 jobs are 'created' with the opening of a woody biomass facility. New management and technical positions will likely be filled by persons outside the community, leaving only minimal employment opportunities for local residents. Creation of new jobs supplying wood to the new facilities is not likely. Instead, existing procurement businesses and employees will simply increase their workload. Overall, burning wood provides the least

economic return on an investment as compared with other possible uses. By focusing state and therefore taxpayer resources on development of a new biomass industry, promotion of other forest industries that could potentially supply more jobs and better returns are ignored.

Communities are concerned that any benefits will go to those who live outside their borders and who are not faced with the day to day challenges of 'living with biomass'. Proponents of this approach often claim that the daily challenges will be placed on their backs. For example, truck traffic associated with hauling logs to the incinerator and shipping out the fuel or ash will put wear and tear on the rural community infrastructure. More traffic in small communities requires more roadways, traffic lights, and is a drain on sewage and electrical systems. The burden for this upkeep falls on the shoulders of local citizens through increased taxation, not corporations located in other states.



In short, insufficient attention is being paid to the complexity of how these new agri-energy proposals will interact with and impact both humans and the environment, the consequences which will be to all our peril and to those of future generations. Climate and energy decision-making (including policy) that fails to account for the detrimental effects of biomass have no place in America's energy future. We owe it to ourselves to be more creative and cautious as we move forward.

