

Destroying forests for no gain

By [Mary Booth and Richard Wiles](#)

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MOST PEOPLE understand that cutting and burning forests adds climate-warming carbon dioxide into the air. Most people, apparently, except for those at the EPA.

Less than 10 days after the EPA began requiring that new power plants mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, the agency caved to industry demands and exempted the biomass industry from regulation of greenhouse gas emissions for three years.

The EPA's capitulation clears the way for a boom in biomass power that threatens to consume millions of acres of forests, perpetuate coal use, and accelerate climate change. It's hard to imagine a worse "renewable" energy policy than this.

Proponents of biomass power claim that the carbon dioxide emitted from burning mill waste and logging residues should not count, since these materials would emit carbon dioxide anyway if left to decompose. But this is irrelevant, because these sources of "waste" wood are insufficient to fuel biomass power plants at the scale proposed.

Expanding biomass power means burning trees, and fueling the more than 200 proposed biomass facilities and coal plants that plan to burn wood will require increased forest cutting on a potentially massive scale. As demonstrated in a state-commissioned Massachusetts study, burning trees for power dramatically increases carbon dioxide emissions per unit energy generated, relative to fossil fuels. In a typical New England forest, it would take more than 40 years of forest regrowth and carbon sequestration just to bring biomass carbon pollution down to the level of coal. The state is now restricting the eligibility of biomass power for renewable energy credits, a science-based policy that is unique in the world.

The rest of the country, still in thrall to the industry, is increasingly faced with proposals to turn forests into fuel. In North Carolina, Duke Energy got the state utility commission to sign off on co-firing whole trees with coal to produce "renewable" energy. American Electric Power recently calculated that delivering just 200 megawatts of biomass power in Ohio would require the equivalent of clearcutting up to 750,000 acres of forests over the coming years.

The explosion in biomass power is being driven by massive federal giveaways, at taxpayer expense. It is estimated that each facility will cost taxpayers \$30 million to \$60 million even

as ratepayers pay more to cover the cost of the “renewable energy credits” that most states grant to biomass power.

These same ratepayers need to know that expanding biomass power will not only worsen carbon dioxide emissions, but will also destroy standing forests, our best defense against global warming.

There is no science behind the EPA’s decision to exempt biomass power from its greenhouse gas rules. The political rationale is not obvious either, since the original requirement threatened no jobs, affecting only new facilities and those making major modifications. If the EPA really needs three years to study whether burning biomass emits carbon dioxide, shouldn’t it also hold off on permitting new biomass facilities until the science is in?

Mary Booth and Richard Wiles have founded the Partnership for Policy Integrity to bring science to public policy issues. ■

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