

Burning biomass to generate energy is a dirty business Guest viewpoint

By Lisa Arkin

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The Environmental Protection Agency has proposed that biomass incinerators be required to report greenhouse gas emissions when the government starts regulating carbon next year. Under the Clean Air Act, carbon pollution from biomass will be regulated just like carbon pollution from oil or coal-fired power plants. The EPA made the right decision, based on the evidence that burning trees to meet our nation's voracious energy appetite may disrupt the balance of the carbon cycle. Greenhouse gas reporting will expose the heavy carbon burden of burning wood to make energy.

Oddly, the July 13 Register-Guard editorial "Biomass and carbon" faults the EPA for its decision to monitor pollution from biomass plants, ignoring recently published data that disproves the old assumption that biomass is clean, green and carbon-neutral.

The EPA isn't the only agency casting doubts on the wisdom of burning biomass for energy; the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources commissioned a study, published in June, to determine the atmospheric implications of burning trees and woody debris to generate electricity. Authors of the Massachusetts Manomet Study concluded that burning forest biomass creates a "carbon debt," which occurs when we outpace the Earth's ability to absorb carbon dioxide.

Trees are part of a dynamic carbon cycle that maintains balance in the Earth's atmospheric gases. The carbon debt increases as trees are removed from forests because their ability to absorb carbon from the atmosphere is diminished, and the carbon naturally stored in their woody tissue is prematurely released by burning them in a biomass boiler.

Nonetheless, Register-Guard editors made the statement that Seneca Sawmill Co. would never "log its forests to fuel its power plant."

This is wishful thinking, and it is naive. During a May 15 meeting last year convened by Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy, a Seneca official told government and community representatives that Seneca considered logging for fuel a viable strategy.

When asked if the company would make a commitment not to log for fuel, the Seneca official replied, "No, we can't. We are a business. We don't know what the future will bring."

The EPA and Massachusetts are trying to predict what the future will bring. This is called stewardship. The Manomet study predicts that as fossil fuels become scarcer and more expensive, demands for biomass will rise to the point where total harvest levels will approach total amount of wood grown each year. Such a scenario would include logging for fuel. Logging for fuel tips the carbon equation toward an ever-increasing, unmanageable

“carbon debt.” In the Northeast, there are multiple cases where incinerators are already burning whole trees for fuel to meet the growing demand, including New Hampshire, Vermont and Ohio.

Biomass has been touted as a way to avoid the carbon pollution from slash burning, a common forestry practice in which woody debris from clear-cutting is scraped into piles and burned on site. It is true that slash burning pollutes the air with smoke and greenhouse gases, and that many think that biomass used for fuel can be an alternative to slash burning.

It is a deceptively incomplete — and environmentally unsound — solution. Looking at the larger picture of ecosystem management, the study concludes, forestry practices must be retooled to curb slash burning in order to leave enough woody debris and dead trees on the ground to enhance soil nutrients and to provide wildlife habitat.

The environmentalist Aldo Leopold reminded us that the first rule of intelligent tinkering was to “keep all the pieces,” not burn them.

Seneca is planning to bring logs, treetops, limbs and debris from surrounding logging operations to a boiler facility on the northwestern edge of Eugene’s city limits, just upwind from the lungs of every resident.

Even with air pollution controls, this single plant will pump 500 tons of toxins into the air every year — chemicals that will rain down on the neighborhoods closest to the plant. The cumulative effect will be more air inversions and poor air quality days for the entire Eugene-Springfield area. Burning biomass will not make our air cleaner or improve quality of life. It will increase health risks in central Lane County, and it may boost greenhouse gas production at a time when the government is calling on taxpayers to fund greenhouse-gas reduction projects.

Burning biomass, a process that depletes natural resources and pollutes our neighborhoods, is not the renewable and clean energy panacea that commercial timber companies would have us believe.

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