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NEW LETTER URGES SENATORS TO CLOSE BIOMASS LOOPHOLE

Over twenty environmental groups come out against classifying the burning of trees as “carbon neutral”

PORTLAND, OR – Environmental leaders from around the state called on Oregon’s senators today to close a loophole in proposed federal legislation that designates the burning of trees for power as a “*carbon neutral*” form of energy.

In a letter to Senators Wyden and Merkley, a broad coalition of over twenty forest conservation and climate advocacy groups argues that the loophole is scientifically inaccurate and poses dangerous consequences for Oregon’s forests, the climate, and public health. The letter contends that the loophole would spur the expansion of the biomass industry, which would slow a transition to truly renewable forms of energy while encouraging the development of new, large-scale biomass power plants.

In fact, next month Oregon will get a taste of what an expanded biomass industry could look like as Portland General Electric (PGE) attempts to operate the Boardman coal plant on 100% biomass feedstock for an entire day. Slated to close in 2020, the 550 MW coal plant currently requires 300 tons of coal to operate each day; however, since biomass is far more inefficient than coal, PGE will need 8,000 tons of biomass to run the plant each day of operation. According to government data, new biomass facilities emit over 50% more CO₂ than new coal plants per unit of energy produced. A full transition to biomass would make the Boardman facility the largest biomass facility in the U.S. and would pose severe implications for the climate.

The push for a blanket designation of carbon neutrality comes at a time when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is evaluating how biomass should be incorporated into the transition from fossil fuels. Accounting for biomass emissions is complicated because certain feedstocks (such as mill waste that would be burned anyway) may be carbon neutral, whereas other sources of biomass (such as the cutting of whole trees to generate electricity) release vast reserves of carbon that would otherwise remain unburned. The EPA’s scientific approach accounts for these differences and attempts to determine which biomass proposals should count as solutions to our low-carbon energy needs.

However, the congressional loophole on biomass would override the EPA’s approach and would instead classify all forest bioenergy as carbon neutral. Environmental groups argue that inaccurate biomass policy would spur tremendous growth in the biomass industry, which would have huge consequences for a heavily forested state like Oregon.

Lisa Arkin is the Executive Director of Beyond Toxics, one of groups signed onto the letter, which has worked on biomass for years. According to Arkin, "A growing biomass industry would create excessive levels of fine particulate matter, a dangerous air pollutant, which can lead to serious health problems including asthma attacks, heart attacks and even death. These facilities threaten public health and must be regulated to stringent human health air quality standards."

The coalition letter joins a chorus of dissent from forest and climate scientists, national environmental groups, and medical professionals about the risks a growing biomass industry could have. Even the White House and the EPA's own Scientific Advisory Board has raised serious concerns of any blanket designation of carbon neutrality.

"To not count the significant greenhouse gas emissions released by clearcuts and to then claim that burning those trees as fuel is "carbon-neutral" is both reckless and deceptive," said **Daphne Wysham**, director of the climate and energy program at the Center for Sustainable Economy. "At a time of rising temperatures and record forest fires, we need to protect and restore our forests, not treat them as a source of fuel."

Oregon's senior senator, Ron Wyden, sits on the conference committee reviewing the bill's language and has a long history basing his climate policies on scientific facts. When Wyden was named to the energy bill conference committee, he made a statement on his website saying, "I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to find a path forward on an energy bill that advances the low-carbon economy."

Among the loudest voices in support of the provision are biomass and timber industry groups, which have considerable sway in heavily forested states like Oregon. The industry stands to gain from a carbon neutrality provision as it would put the burning of wood in the same category as wind and solar, thus growing the industry and encouraging increased forest harvest.

Advocates of the biomass-as-carbon-neutral policy claim that when biomass is removed from the forest and burned to generate electricity, the emitted carbon is eventually re-sequestered, or re-captured, by the forest's regrowth. Opponents of a "carbon neutrality" designation are quick to respond that a forest's natural cycle of decomposition and regrowth takes many decades to over a century whereas combustion of biomass emits tremendous amounts of carbon *instantaneously*. Indeed, in the atmosphere there is no distinction between carbon molecules derived from biomass and carbon molecules derived from fossil fuels – both trap heat and warm the planet. It is for that reason that opponents to the loophole have banded together to make sure the carbon emissions of biomass are properly accounted for.

"For our government to meaningfully respond to climate change our Congress must respect the scientific process and take its findings seriously," said **Alexander Harris**, an organizer for the Sierra Club. "Sound biomass policy will be essential in appropriately incorporating biomass into our transition from fossil fuels. Any climate policy that ignores climate science will likely do more harm than good."