

10 Frequently Asked Questions about Biomass Power Combustion

See: *“Biomass Electricity: Clean Energy Subsidies for a Dirty Industry,” Biomass Accountability Project, 2011.*

1. What sort of air pollution is emitted from the smokestack of a biomass power facility?

Environmental Protection Agency data cites up to 79 air pollutants emitted from biomass power facilities such as Burlington Electric Department’s McNeil generating station in Vermont—including particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and volatile organic compounds.

2. Does the expansion of burning of biomass for electricity carry public health risks?

According to the American Lung Association, “burning biomass could lead to significant increases in emissions of nitrogen oxides, particulate matter and sulfur dioxide and have severe impacts on the health of children, older adults, and people with lung diseases.”

Dr. William Sammons, a board certified pediatrician in Massachusetts, says biomass power “will have a direct negative impact on the health of our Nation’s children: both immediately and cumulatively through-out their lifetimes, and for generations to come.”

3. Which federal and state “clean energy” subsidies, funded through taxpayer and ratepayer dollars, are being diverted to polluting biomass power?

Federal and state financial incentives in the form of tax credits, cash grants, loans and renewable energy credits are driving the current rush to build facilities that burn biomass for electricity.

4. How much federal “bailout,” or ARRA stimulus money, has financed the construction of new biomass power incinerators in the U.S.?

As of May 2011, nine commercial electric biomass facilities had received ARRA grants totaling \$102,532,534.57, subsidizing up to 1/3 of the average facility construction costs of \$240 million.

5. Is burning biomass for electricity “carbon neutral?”

Biomass power emits more carbon dioxide than burning coal. “Carbon dioxide emissions from biomass per unit of energy generated are about 1.5 times higher than from coal and 3 to 4 times greater than from natural gas,” according to a June 2010 report from Environmental Working Group.

Recent science, including the “Manomet” study, commissioned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 2010, demonstrates that it would take “40 years of forest regrowth just to get to parity in carbon emissions with burning coal for those same four decades. To get to parity with natural gas would take almost a century,” according to Partnership for Policy Integrity.

6. Which communities are being targeted for the construction of new biomass power incinerators?

A large number of facilities are proposed for communities of color and/or low-income populations—“environmental justice” communities that consume the smallest percentage of electricity while bearing the greatest burdens of air pollution, truck traffic, and other health risks and nuisances.

7. Does the biomass power industry burn trees or just “waste wood?”

Forest ecologists insist there is no such thing as “waste wood” in a forest, only future soil nutrients. Even so, according to RISI’s 2008 “Wood Biomass Market Report,” “the perceived overabundance of ‘waste wood’ in the nation’s forests is simply not there. As a result, the increased demand for more traditional forms of woodfiber has already triggered wood price spikes and cross-grade competition in the tightest markets.”

According to the US Department of Agriculture’s “Southern Forest Futures Project,” 2011 “Energy forecasts show wood use for bioenergy starting with and then quickly exhausting harvest residuals and other available wood waste. As a result, bioenergy demand would lead to additional harvesting of raw material, especially softwood pulpwood.”

9. How much electricity could the doubling of biomass power create in the US?

0.9% of U.S. electricity use came from wood-based biomass power, according to the Energy Information Administration in September 2010. Doubling biomass power would threaten public health, worsen climate change, and degrade forests and watersheds for only 2% of U.S. electricity.

10. How does biomass power compare to non-smokestack renewable energy sources, such as solar or wind, in regards to impacts on health and environment?

Unlike biomass power, after construction, neither solar nor wind projects emit air pollutants, release greenhouse gases, require fresh water for cooling, or depend on continual forest logging to operate.