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Green

Energy, the Environment and the Bottom Line

# Bill Gives New Meaning to Biomass

By Libby Tucker    May 19, 2009 8:03 am

Up until last week, the climate and energy bill didn't consider biomass collected from federal forestlands as a renewable feedstock under the proposed national renewable energy standard.

The definition of a renewable feedstock was carried over from the 2007 energy bill, which prevents biomass collected from federal land from being used in the renewable fuels mix — a nuance reflecting the concern among environmental groups that demand for biofuels could eventually trump sustainable forestry practices and further degrade national forests.

Greenwire reports, however, that the latest draft of the Waxman-Markey bill contains a compromise on the definition — one that would allow the use of some non-commercial biomass removed from federally managed forests only in order to prevent forest fires or restore ecosystem health.

It would restrict the use of biomass collected from old-growth stands.

The change could improve the economic feasibility of managing national forests and ultimately help create a market for small-diameter trees, brush and forest slash — materials with little value to the timber industry, said Bill Carlson, a biomass power consultant and former chairman of the Biomass Power Association.

Allowing the collection of biomass for energy production would also extend the value of the \$224 million in hazardous fuel reduction grants awarded by the Department of Agriculture, especially in states like Wyoming and Utah, which have

vast swaths of federal lands, but haven't already adopted state renewable energy standards, said Mr. Carlson.

The Waxman-Markey bill may not expand the market for forest biomass enough to dramatically grow the industry, however.

Oregon, slated to receive more than \$51 million of the stimulus grants, has a state standard as well as a slew of tax incentives for biomass energy facilities, and yet the state has been only marginally successful in creating a market for the small stuff, said Joe Misek, a forest policy analyst with the Oregon Department of Forestry.

"People are still trying to figure out how to do it economically," Mr. Misek said.

A few other proposals in Congress are aimed at further growing the market for biomass, however, including House and Senate versions of a policy that would amend the energy bill to allow biomass from federal lands to qualify as renewable feedstock for biofuels production.

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