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Green
Energy, the Environment and the Bottom Line

Raising the Bar on Biomass

By Tom Zeller Jr. July 8, 2010 11:45 am

A quick update on the struggles of the biomass power industry, which has long enjoyed a reputation for delivering renewable and low-carbon energy:

As I wrote a couple of weeks ago, that reputation — which has generated tax breaks and other incentives in a variety of states — has come under increasing scrutiny.

Among other complaints, opponents of biomass power — which, depending on the location, involves burning organic matter like plants and trees to generate electricity — say the incentives would create a rapacious industry driven to gobble up forests that would have absorbed more carbon dioxide if they'd simply been left alone.

Massachusetts became locked in a fierce battle over the issue, prompting state officials to commission a comprehensive review of the science related to biomass. That study landed last month, and this week, energy regulators there said they were revamping the rules relating to biomass and renewable energy incentives.

In a letter released Wednesday, Ian A. Bowles, the state's secretary for energy and environmental affairs, instructed the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources to draft new regulations that would raise the bar for biomass projects angling to qualify for credits, including a requirement that they provide "significant near-term greenhouse gas dividends."

That cuts to the heart of the biomass challenge: while burning trees and plants releases carbon dioxide, living trees and plants absorb it.

That's technically true, of course, but striking a balance, even with careful replanting standards, is no easy matter — and some critics say the give-and-take cycle of biomass power occurs over too long a time frame to really address the problem of global warming, the key driver behind renewable energy incentives.

In keeping with the recent study, the state is requiring new considerations for what fuel sources are used, how they are grown and harvested, and whether they would provide a greater benefit being left in place.

Mr. Bowles also called for clear definitions of “residues” and “waste wood” — that is, the branches and other debris left behind after storms or forest harvests. This is potentially the best stuff to burn, as it would have given up its carbon content anyway, but some of it needs to be left behind on forest floors, for soil health and sustainable regrowth. Rules on this are to be outlined as well.

Finally, the state plans to throw its greatest support behind biomass plants producing both power and heat, which the study found to be much more efficient than plants that generate power alone, which means they can reap climate benefits much more quickly.

“We have a deeper understanding,” Mr. Bowles wrote, “that the greenhouse gas impacts of biomass energy are far more complicated than the conventional view that electricity from power plants using biomass harvested from New England natural forests is carbon neutral.”