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Mind Boggling Forest-Gobbling Biomass Boondoggle

by Rachel Smolker

Who knew that something as environmentally friendly sounding as “renewable energy” could pose a monumental threat to forests and public health? Burning, of forests and other “biomass” is in fact doing just that: threatening to decimate lands, dump billions of tons of CO₂ into the already-overburdened atmosphere, and leave us all breathing particulates and other air pollutants deep into our lungs to wreak havoc with our health.

To understand the magnitude of this assault, consider the recent developments in Ohio: The states’ Public Utilities Commission (aka “PUCO”) is on track to permit a whopping 2442 megawatts of electricity to be generated from burning wood as a substitute for, or in combination with coal. Estimates are that this will require around 26 million tons of wood per year. Just to supply this amount of wood for the first year of operation alone, would require harvesting 5 times the current annual growth of all public and private forests in the state. In fact the plan is to truck in woodchips from surrounding states as well - as far away as Florida.

Ohio’s plans alone will nearly double the total amount of biomass-burning for electricity in the entire United States. Incinerating forests and other “biomass” is already the darling of “renewables” in this and other countries, responsible for more than half of what passes as renewable energy generation. Smokestacks, spewing more CO₂ per unit of energy than coal, along with particulates and other pollution, 24/7, not the windmills and solar panels of our imaginations, predominate.



Ironically, even as we are providing incentives to cut and burn forests, both here and abroad, for so-called “renewable energy”, climate negotiations have focused much attention on how to protect forests as one of the easiest and most effective ways to address global warming. This protection option is vanishing with policies and subsidies that reward burning forests for electricity.

Presented as a solution to global warming, biomass electricity is anything but. Science (and common sense) clearly indicate that burning, and the secondary

impacts of overharvesting and soil depletion contribute to global warming. The much publicized “Manomet Biomass Sustainability and Carbon Policy Study” – commissioned by the Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources - attempted to model CO₂ emissions from a lifecycle analysis of the harvesting and burning of wood for electricity. They reported that the “carbon debt” resulting from biomass electricity will take from 20-90 years to “repay”, depending on whether the biomass is replacing coal or natural gas generation. Alarming as these findings are, they seriously underestimate the impact, given assumptions of the Manomet models (and spelled out in the review by Clean Air Task Force).

Ohio apparently hasn’t read the Manomet Study or any of the other burgeoning literature that reveals what a sham biomass electricity is. The state has a long and intimate history with coal. With global warming becoming increasingly tangible, coal miners killed or trapped underground on a near daily basis, and with activists from Appalachia becoming increasingly vocal in their objection to having their mountain homeland blasted to smithereens and their children poisoned – the public perception of coal is shifting. That is not to say we are mining and burning less of it (*see “Coal’s Comeback, Oct 31, Washington Post*). But there is distinct advantage in cultivating at least an appearance of being more “green”.

Ohio is burdened with a collection of old, dirty and inefficient coal plants, unable to satisfy current Environmental Protection Agency air pollution regulations. Desperately seeking a fresh green makeover and an extended lease on life for these facilities, the quick and easy (so called) “solution” is to substitute “living coal” -- biomass that hasn’t yet been around long enough to mineralize and metamorphose into coal -- for the old dirty dead variety. Somehow, nonsensically, shoving forests or garbage or manure, sewage sludge -- you name it -- into incinerators, is still considered “clean and renewable” and we are subsidizing the practice with billions of taxpayer dollars.

Companies like *First Energies* who own Ohio’s 312 Burger plant, one of the first to be approved to burn a mix of 80% wood and 20% coal - will be allowed to gorge on public subsidies, including funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Ohio, like other states, rewards the production of renewable energy with Renewable Energy Credits (RECS). Normally one REC is earned per megawatt of renewable electricity produced. But the Burger facility is extra special: this facility will be eligible for so called “Super” or “False” REC's. This is thanks to a “multiplier” provision, written into Ohio Law, that will allow the Burger facility to artificially inflate the RECs it generates from biomass burning, making it exceedingly profitable for the company. Expectations are that this will have profound impacts – flooding the market with RECs, hence devaluing them, and creating a “death spiral” that will undermine the state’s non-solar REC market. In fact, estimates suggest that the Burger plant will produce nearly enough RECs in June of 2012 alone to satisfy all of the in-state REC requirements through 2024 for all of the utilities in Ohio.

The desktop of my laptop computer is awash in unread and yet to be filed documents. Peeking out through it is an image I have special fondness for: that famous photograph of the earth from space. Like a beautiful marble, the land appears mostly a brilliant green, the oceans deep blue, and all of it partly obscured by the fluffy smudges of cloud cover here and there.

Unfortunately, most of the documents that are strewn across this lovely image are news articles and reports detailing the demise of all that loveliness – global warming, biodiversity loss, hunger and poverty, and now the boondoggle of renewable energy from biomass burning. I imagine that if we were to take the same picture of earth from space today we would see all that brilliant green fading under a brown haze of smoke. And the worst irony is that people are applauding and rewarding all that cutting and burning as “renewable energy”.

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