

# CLIMATE: Battle over biomass looms in Senate (09/22/2009)

Patrick Reis, E&E reporter

The biomass industry and environmental groups are gearing up for a lobbying battle that could stretch the climate coalition past its breaking point.

Support for biomass energy and biofuels in the House climate bill ([H.R. 2454](#)) were a key carrot dangled to garner the support of farm-state moderates, but for some environmental groups, it was another in a series of compromises that made the bill too weak to tolerate.

After repeated struggles between liberal Democrats and Blue Dog moderates including Agriculture Chairman Collin Peterson (D-Minn.), the final House bill would not require biomass plants to buy carbon allowances for their emissions or count those emissions as part of the total U.S. contribution to global warming.

Biomass advocates claimed victory, saying the bill was right to characterize it as carbon-neutral. "We're being treated like wind or solar, geothermal and other renewables," said Bob Cleaves, president of the Biomass Power Association. "We are fundamentally different than fossil fuels."

Industry advocates insist that biomass adds no new carbon to the atmosphere. Instead, it simply harnesses timber harvest byproducts that, even if left on the forest floor, would release greenhouse gases as they decompose. So long as forests are sustainably managed, the advocates say, they will reabsorb the carbon equivalent released during biomass burning.

But for some, the provisions were a betrayal of long-running campaigns that battled biomass plants on environmental grounds.

"It's a myth that these large [biomass] plants can operate as carbon-neutral," said Mary Booth, founder of the Massachusetts Environmental Energy Alliance. "For big plants, per megawatt hour of energy generated, the [initial] carbon dioxide emissions for a wood-burning plant are 1.5 times those of a coal plant."

In a July letter dropped at Senate offices, the environmental coalition EcoLaw asked senators to include biomass plants among those entities that are required to buy emissions permits and for their initial carbon emissions to be counted the same as emissions from other sources.

The House bill encourages biomass but then ignores its consequences, the letter said. By 2020, biomass emissions will amount to 700 million tons of carbon dioxide, turning what on paper is mandated to be an 18 percent emissions reduction into an 11 percent reduction, the letter said.

"If we are to address the climate change crisis, we must ensure that greenhouse gas emissions from biomass burning and other combustion technologies classified as 'renewable energy resources' under the Renewable Energy Standards in ACES are actually counted," EcoLaw wrote.

Unless such changes are made, some environmentalists say they cannot support the bill.

## Friends in key places

But in pulling their support, the hard-liners may not be bringing any Senate votes with them. EcoLaw's Margaret Sheehan, a lawyer who has worked to influence the bill, says few in the Senate seem ready to oppose the bill on the grounds that it is too "weak."

And if there are few senators who would be willing to pull their support of the climate bill on the grounds that it is too soft on biomass, support for the energy source may be a make-or-break issue for some key swing voters, such as Maine Republican Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins.

The Maine moderates may have significant leverage in crafting climate legislation, as they present the Democrats with a rare opportunity get votes from the other side of the aisle.

Both have a track record of supporting biomass. Collins and Snowe are both cosponsors of [S. 870](#), which would expand the tax credits for renewable energy to include biomass, and Snowe is cosponsor of [S. 1090](#), which would put renewable production tax credits for biomass on par with those for wind energy.

Biomass Power Association's Cleaves also said he could count on biomass backing from new Senate Agriculture Chairwoman Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.), a moderate Democrat whose vote on climate legislation could be tough to get.

Lincoln is the principal sponsor of S. 870, but she opposes the House version of the climate bill because it "picks winners and losers," said spokeswoman Katie Laning Niebaum. Her support of any potential climate legislation in the Senate would depend on specific provisions within the bill, Niebaum said.

"In her role as Agriculture Committee chairwoman, she will make sure the voice of agriculture is heard in the debate," Niebaum said.

Biomass has West Coast support as well. Oregon Democratic Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley [introduced legislation](#) in March that would amend the Clean Air Act to broaden the definition to include timber harvest byproducts taken from most national forest lands.

## Carbon-neutrality claims remain controversial

But while the political support for biomass appears solid, the science behind classifying it as carbon neutral remains a matter of ongoing debate.

In a *San Francisco Chronicle* op-ed yesterday, Gregory Morris -- who has an interdisciplinary doctorate in energy and resources and has done work for the Biomass Power Association -- backed biomass and blasted its critics.

Morris said that when biomaterial is burned instead of allowed to decompose naturally, it produces more carbon and less methane, contributing less to global warming than would the natural process. Because of this effect, within a few years of burning, biomass energy is not only carbon neutral, but carbon negative, Morris wrote.

"But that hasn't stopped fear-mongering aimed at denying biomass credit as a clean-energy source," Morris said. "Some are concerned that if forest residue is recognized as carbon-neutral, entire forests will be clear cut to rake in carbon-offset profit. You can make the math work, but it's just not going to happen."

Critics remain unsatisfied.

Bill Sammons, a Massachusetts medical doctor, and signatory to the Senate biomass letter, said the lag time between when carbon is emitted and when it is reabsorbed is problematic because it produces a spike in atmospheric carbon levels, the key driver of global warming.

He pointed out studies predicting the carbon released today will not be reabsorbed for decades or even centuries -- far too late to meet U.S. emissions reduction goals or to halt atmospheric carbon concentration at a level scientists say is necessary to mitigate the worst effects of warming.

Burning biomass will "accelerate the release of carbon into the air in the next 10, 20, 30 years, and that's the window that we need to pay attention to," Sammons said. "You could argue that it's carbon-neutral over the next hundred to a thousand years, but that's not relevant."

EcoLaw's Sheehan said she is deeply dismayed by the strong Senate backing for an energy source whose climate merits remain a matter of ongoing debate.

"That says to us that this bill is about politics and not about doing the right thing for the planet and not about reducing our carbon dioxide. It's about how many corporate giveaways does this bill have to contain so that we can say we passed a climate bill," Sheehan said. "If senators refuse to acknowledge that, it shows that the process is pretty corrupt."