



SUPPORT S.2197/H.3333

An Act to Prevent Biomass Energy to Protect the Air We Breathe

Sen. Lesser (First Hampden/Hampshire), Rep. Livingstone (Boston), Rep. Ramos (Chicopee/Springfield)

BILL PURPOSE: S.2197/H.3333 removes woody biomass as an eligible fuel source in Massachusetts' Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard (RPS), which promotes renewable electricity, and Alternative Energy Portfolio Standard (APS), which includes incentives for renewable heating technologies.

THE ISSUE: The Baker Administration has expanded subsidies for woody biomass energy through Massachusetts' clean energy programs, rolling back critical health and environmental protections and undermining the Commonwealth's climate goals. Burning wood for energy is highly inefficient and can increase greenhouse gas impacts for decades to centuries compared with fossil fuels. Biomass power plants and heating systems are also a significant source of fine particulate matter and other harmful air pollutants. Low-income communities, communities of color, and sensitive populations such as children, older people, and people with heart and lung disease, are especially at risk from breathing polluted air. Recent studies have shown that people exposed to higher levels of air pollution also experience more severe symptoms and higher death rates from Covid-19. **The Legislature must eliminate clean energy subsidies for harmful and polluting woody biomass energy and focus on real climate solutions.**

BACKGROUND: The Commonwealth has established ambitious goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the 2008 *Global Warming Solutions Act* and the *Next Generation Climate Roadmap* law enacted in 2021. Massachusetts has been a national leader in developing innovative programs to achieve these climate goals.

Massachusetts' RPS and APS programs are both intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and move the state away from burning fossil fuels. The RPS requires electric utilities to obtain a percentage of the electricity they supply from qualifying renewable energy facilities. Similarly, the APS provides requirements and incentives for alternative energy sources that are energy efficient, including renewable heating technologies. Eligible power generators rely on these guaranteed annual revenues, subsidized by Massachusetts ratepayers, to finance, construct, and operate their facilities.

In 2012, following a lengthy and robust stakeholder process, Massachusetts adopted the most stringent, science-based standards in the nation for wood-burning power plants to qualify as renewable energy. As a result, only a handful of small, highly efficient combined heat and power (CHP) biomass plants continued to qualify for Massachusetts' RPS, while many older, inefficient biomass power plants in Maine and elsewhere in New England were booted out of the program.

However, the Baker Administration has systematically worked to dismantle these hard-won health and environmental protections and expand subsidies for woody biomass. In 2017, despite the strict

limitations on eligible wood heating systems spelled out in the APS statute, the Department of Energy Resources (DOER) adopted weak emissions standards and forest protection guidelines for qualifying wood heating systems in the APS. In 2019, DOER proposed weakening the RPS regulations to match the APS regulations, calling it “regulatory streamlining.”

Despite overwhelming public opposition, DOER has pushed through sweeping rule changes that will allow existing polluting biomass plants across the Northeast to once again qualify for Massachusetts’ RPS.¹ The one concession DOER made to public pressure was to prohibit biomass plants sited in or near environmental justice communities from qualifying for the RPS. This is a significant new provision that will ensure that new biomass plants, such as a controversial biomass power plant that was proposed in East Springfield, are not likely to be built in Massachusetts. However, the overall weakening of the biomass standards in the RPS means that Massachusetts ratepayers may end up subsidizing extremely polluting out-of-state biomass power plants as so-called “renewable energy,” fundamentally undermining Massachusetts’ climate, clean energy, and sustainable forestry goals.

WHY THIS LEGISLATION IS NEEDED: Climate scientists agree that we must take urgent action in the coming decade to both reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect and restore forests as natural carbon sinks to draw down and sequester atmospheric carbon. PFPI’s research shows that even when only wood *residues* are burned (as opposed to whole trees logged for fuel), woody biomass energy is a net source of carbon for decades – well past the timeframe for meaningful climate action.

Furthermore, new information continues to emerge regarding the health impacts of fine particulate matter emissions (PM_{2.5}), the leading cause of air pollution-related illness and death in the U.S. Although only a small fraction (less than 2%) of Massachusetts residents heat with wood, the latest EPA emissions data show that wood heating accounts for 83% of all PM_{2.5} emissions from Massachusetts’ heating sector, and 22% of the state’s total PM_{2.5} emissions. **It makes no sense, from a climate or a public health perspective, to use the state’s clean energy incentives to subsidize wood burning for heat or energy.**

PFPI urges you to support and co-sponsor S.2197/H.3333, *An act to prevent biomass energy to protect the air we breathe.*

*For further information please contact James McCaffrey, New England Legislative Director,
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¹ See DOER’s Phase 2 RPS regulation, filed 10/29/21, <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/rps-class-i-ii-rulemaking>