

BIOMASS: FUEL OR FOLLY? | BOB CLEAVES

A Win for Environment and for Energy

By [Bob Cleaves](#)

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LAST WEEK, the Environmental Protection Agency announced its interim policy on biomass energy and climate change — an announcement that was cause for celebration for all renewable energy advocates. The EPA concluded, for the first time, that biomass plays an important role in “addressing climate change and enhancing forest management” and that states now have a legal and scientific basis for concluding that biomass for energy is the “best available control technology” to curb greenhouse gases. The biomass industry converts wood byproducts and agricultural residues like tree trimmings and forest floor debris into clean energy. However, for the past two years, opponents of biomass have questioned the benefits of biomass and whether carbon emissions from wood and agricultural debris burned in boilers were being properly “counted” for carbon.

The biomass industry is fighting back against naysayers who forget to mention that, if not used for energy, agricultural byproducts would decompose and cause a more potent form of carbon (methane) or contribute to forest fires. Contrary to what opponents say, biomass energy producers do not cause deforestation or threaten the health of forests. Moreover, collecting wood and agricultural debris left over from harvesting has a profoundly different carbon life cycle analysis than “new” carbon emitted from coal and other fossil fuels.

The EPA decision demonstrates that our continued efforts to show America the benefits of biomass have not gone unnoticed. However, we know we still have a long way to go to be recognized for our role in America’s renewable energy sector.

The EPA recently acknowledged that “waste materials whose inevitable decomposition will result in greenhouse gas emissions anyway have only limited climate impacts.” If the EPA wants to take three years to develop a more complicated regulatory regime, we welcome the process, as it is an opportunity for us to share the scientific basis for why America should join the rest of the world in promoting this form of energy.

The EPA’s three-year deferral is a clear signal of support for owners, operators, and developers of biomass projects looking for some modicum of regulatory certainty in the near-term. And it has important implications for natural resource-based economies throughout rural America. That stack of waste wood left over from a logging operation in Massachusetts, or orchard prunings left behind in California, or

rice hulls from a mill in Louisiana — it's all renewable and will be a wasted opportunity if we don't grow and promote this sector. American farmers and loggers should be encouraged to find a home for that material — and be proud that they are helping move America toward its renewable energy goals.

The EPA is finally beginning to embrace biomass, and we promise it will benefit our country. The decision is a win for the environment and a win for the nation's energy future.

Bob Cleaves is president and CEO of the Biomass Power Association. ■

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