

July 8, 2016, 12:57 pm

Congress must act on bioenergy

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While it may not be as entertaining (or as bizarre) as the presidential election, Congress is about to make a decision that could have profound effects on the future of American energy.

The question they face is this: Should the U.S. treat “biomass” energy generated from our forests—one of the most renewable, recyclable, and greenest resources on the planet—like a part of our clean energy solution, or should it be treated like part of the problem?

Until recently, the answer seemed clear. The United States, like the rest of the world, had an energy policy that recognized the carbon benefits of forest biomass. They recognized that much of it comes from wood and paper manufacturing leftovers that would have otherwise ended up wasting away in landfills. And they realized that unlike fossil fuels, economically viable bioenergy markets incentivize the same industries producing the energy to plant the trees that will capture and store carbon for generations to come.

That seems like a win-win, right?

But then, without public notice—let alone scientific basis—government policy changed in 2010. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began to regulate greenhouse gases (GHGs) emitted from biomass the same as they did fossil fuels. And the years since have only brought further confusion and uncertainty. EPA committed to revising the policy by 2014, but that effort has yet to conclude. And recent, unprecedented gridlock within EPA’s Science Advisory Board—the body tasked with ensuring that EPA policy is empirically grounded—only serves to exacerbate the problem.

Congress is now trying to break that gridlock and provide much needed clarity, introducing legislation based on well-established science and widely accepted data.

In other words, Congress is doing its job. The status quo has left biomass markets in a limbo, with forest owners (many of them families) wondering whether they should sell off their land to real estate developers in the absence of economic incentives to maintain it as productive forest. Congressional action would free them to produce renewable, low-carbon biomass energy to power mills and communities.

But this effort faces obstacles from detractors who base their opposition on a flawed view of the way forests and the forest products industry interact. They portray our industries as “destroyers” of forestland, instead of as its most enthusiastic stewards.

The truth is, our forests are an American success story. With a strong marketplace for wood products, our volume of growing trees has increased by 50 percent since the 1950s, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). And biomass provides a strong new incentive to continue that trend. As [Robert Johansson](#), Chief Economist of the USDA has said specifically about biomass, “Vibrant markets for wood materials raise the value of forest lands and encourage investment, regrowth and expansion.”

At the risk of bragging, there is no better example of the sustainable potential of biomass energy than our industries themselves. The pulp, paper, packaging, tissue and wood products sectors use biomass for roughly two-thirds of our power, and so we are able to dramatically reduce our fossil fuel purchases. And we do it with leftovers from the manufacturing process—along with wood lost due to insects, disease and fire, that would otherwise decompose naturally emitting the carbon back into the atmosphere.

Even more critically, biomass powers the growth of our most powerful natural “carbon capture” technology—the American forestland, which in addition to filtering 25 percent of our drinking water, preserving critical wildlife habitat, and protecting the cultural and economic foundation of hundreds of communities and 2.4 million jobs, also offsets 13 percent of total U.S. CO2 emissions each year.

This fundamental scientific truth is recognized by the U.S. government, the European Union, and the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—along with one hundred nationally recognized U.S. forest scientists, representing 80 top research universities, who wrote to the EPA to make this case.

We strongly believe government policy should reflect this reality.

Congressional action recognizing the many benefits of biomass – its importance to the environment, rural America, the economy, and our energy future – is long overdue. We thank the bipartisan leadership in both the House and Senate for their efforts to produce a practical, clear policy that will provide a path forward for forest biomass as part of a viable, low-carbon energy solution.

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