200 scientists from 35 states sent a letter to members of Congress outlining their concerns with **Trump administration proposals to define wod biomass burning as a carbon neutral energy source**

"We find no scientific evidence to support increased logging to store more carbon in wood products ... as a natural climate solution," they wrote. "Furthermore, the scientific evidence does not support the burning of wood in place of fossil fuels as a climate solution."

In recent years, members of both Congress and the Trump administration have proposed various measures that would define biomass burning as a carbon neutral energy source.

Multiple federal spending bills in the last few years have included language urging EPA and other federal agencies to adopt policies that define wood burning as a renewable energy source. Former EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt expressed support for such changes.

No such policies have yet been enacted.

"The science is so clear as to how bad this is for the carbon balance," said Bill Moomaw, a professor emeritus and co-director of the Center for International Environment and Resource Policy at Tufts University. He helped organize the letter to Congress.

For one thing, there's the matter of timing.

It could take decades for a newly planted forest to absorb the same amount of carbon contained by the harvested trees it's replacing.

In addition, burning those trees for energy releases all their carbon immediately. And those carbon emissions affect the climate right away — at a time when the world is struggling to cut emissions.

https://www.eenews.net/climatewire/2020/05/22/stories/1063198657

ENERGY TRANSITIONS

Scientists blast idea of wood burning as climate fix

Chelsea Harvey, E&E News reporter Published: Friday, May 22, 2020

Biomass material is collected in the Pacific Northwest. A large group of scientists is warning that biomass energy will not help solve climate change. U.S. Forest Service

Hundreds of scientists are urging lawmakers to oppose legislation that would encourage wood burning or logging as potential climate solutions.

The science doesn't support it, they say.

Last week, more than 200 scientists from 35 states sent a letter to members of Congress outlining their concerns.

"We find no scientific evidence to support increased logging to store more carbon in wood products ... as a natural climate solution," they wrote. "Furthermore, the scientific evidence does not support the burning of wood in place of fossil fuels as a climate solution."

In recent years, members of both Congress and the Trump administration have proposed various measures that would define biomass burning as a carbon neutral energy source.

Multiple federal spending bills in the last few years have included language urging EPA and other federal agencies to adopt policies that define wood burning as a renewable energy source. Former EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt expressed support for such changes.

No such policies have yet been enacted.

But the issue recently reared its head again. Last month, EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler announced the agency was working on a proposal that would classify energy from biomass burning as carbon neutral.

As the argument goes, trees that are harvested for bioenergy can be replaced by planting new trees. In that sense, biomass burning is technically a renewable energy source. Some proponents argue that the carbon absorbed by newly planted trees would offset the carbon released by burning the old ones.

But scientists consistently have taken issue with the idea that biomass burning is a climate-friendly solution.

"The science is so clear as to how bad this is for the carbon balance," said Bill Moomaw, a professor emeritus and co-director of the Center for International Environment and Resource Policy at Tufts University. He helped organize the letter to Congress.

For one thing, there's the matter of timing.

It could take decades for a newly planted forest to absorb the same amount of carbon contained by the harvested trees it's replacing.

In addition, burning those trees for energy releases all their carbon immediately. And those carbon emissions affect the climate right away — at a time when the world is struggling to cut emissions.

There's also all the extra emissions associated with logging and transporting timber, Moomaw added. Those emissions aren't offset just by replacing the harvested trees.

Other scientists have addressed the same issues over the last few years.

William Schlesinger, former president of the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, published a 2018 commentary in Science attacking the idea of wood burning as a carbon neutral practice.

"Trees remove CO2 from the atmosphere, and burning wood returns it," he noted. "But recent evidence shows that the use of wood as fuel is likely to result in net CO2 emissions and may endanger forest biodiversity."

An energy bill passed by the Senate in 2016 proposed that EPA define biomass burning as a carbon neutral energy source. More than 60 scientists submitted a letter to members of the Senate in response, outlining their concerns.

"This well-intentioned legislation, which claims to address climate change, would in fact promote deforestation in the U.S. and elsewhere and make climate change much worse," they wrote.

'Proforestation management'

The new letter to Congress also takes a swipe at lumber as a natural climate solution.

In recent years, timber has gained traction as a more sustainable building alternative to concrete and steel. Put together, the cement, iron and steel industries account for more than 10% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

A recent deep dive by Vox explored the pros and cons of building with timber, both climate-related and otherwise.

Exact estimates of its emissions are difficult to pin down — and likely depend heavily on choices made throughout the supply chain and the construction process.

But some recent analyses have suggested that wood is more sustainable, with greenhouse gas emissions up to 25% lower than those associated with other building materials.

Still, signers of the letter to Congress pointed to other recent studies suggesting these benefits may be overstated.

Moomaw cautioned that "this is not an argument to never cut another tree."

But he suggested U.S. policymakers should more carefully calculate how much carbon is stored in the country's forests and then make informed decisions about how they can best be used to address climate change, including "what fraction of the forest should be managed for forest products."

Overall, the letter advocates for policies that increase, rather than decrease, the amount of carbon stored in forests. It calls for members of Congress to adopt a perspective that "emphasizes increased forest protections, and a shift away from consumption of wood products and forest biomass energy, to help mitigate the climate crisis."

At the same time, nearly 400 scientists from around the world just submitted a separate letter to the European Parliament — the legislative branch of the European Union. It urges members to recognize the relationship between forests and climate change.

The E.U. is in the process of devising updates to its forest, biodiversity and other environmental policies. The letter encourages members of Parliament to consider policies that would protect standing forests and the carbon stocks they contain.

"In order to maintain a stable and livable climate, it will be necessary to continue reducing emissions and removing and accumulating additional atmospheric carbon dioxide in forests and other natural systems after 2050," the letter states. "Avoiding further emissions from forests and storing additional carbon in them is therefore essential for achieving this ambitious goal."

The letter advocates for a management practice known as "proforestation management" — essentially protecting existing forests and allowing them to reach their highest carbon storage potential.

Experts increasingly have advocated for natural climate solutions, especially forest conservation, in the fight against climate change. A landmark report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change last year warned that land management is inextricably linked to climate change and that more sustainable land use practices — including the preservation of large carbon sinks like forests and wetlands — are a crucial climate mitigation tool.

"We really have to be increasing the intake of carbon by forests and wetlands and agricultural soils and rangelands and grasslands and so on," Moomaw said. "Or we're never gonna get close to halting the growth of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere."

Heather Hillaker

Associate Attorney | Southern Environmental Law Center

601 West Rosemary Street, Suite 220 | Chapel Hill, NC 27516-2356

T: 919-967-1450 Ext. 132

F: 919-929-9421

E: hhillaker@selcnc.org

http://www.southernenvironment.org