

Press Release
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Biomass Working Group's Recommendations Threaten Vermont's Public Health, Forests, Climate, and Clean Energy Economy

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Recommendations in the final report of the State of Vermont's legislatively-appointed Biomass Energy Development Working Group (BEWG), released in late January, will result in increased toxic air pollution and the emission of millions of tons of climate-changing greenhouse gases, degrade Vermont's iconic forests through intensive "whole-tree harvesting," heighten the risk of transporting invasive insects like the emerald ash borer, and divert clean energy subsidies from non-polluting, community-scale energy projects such as solar photovoltaics, small wind, and micro-hydro.

In its final report, the BEWG chose not to address public health impacts from biomass burning despite numerous complaints from communities facing biomass proposals across the state and concerns from public health organizations, such as the American Lung Association in Vermont. The BEWG did recommend that the issue of air pollution be taken up in the State Legislature.

The Working Group also chose not to address the carbon dioxide smokestack emissions of burning biomass, which recent studies have demonstrated to be even greater than from burning coal. The main impetus behind developing renewable energy sources is to *reduce* carbon dioxide emissions.

The BEWG was heavily weighted in favor of logging and biomass burning industries. Of 14 stakeholders, 9 currently or have recently worked in the biomass or forest products sector. The sole environmental group represented in the Working Group has previously advocated for an expansion of biomass energy in Vermont. Missing slots in the Working Group included a public health advocate, forest ecologist, hydrologist, soil scientist, wildlife biologist, and an objective environmental group.

The report includes recommendations for an expansion of 900,000 green tons per year for biomass energy projects, which would be the clearcut equivalent of 7,900 acres (~ 6,000 football fields) of forests per year. The report suggests only minimal and voluntary "harvest" and "procurement" guidelines. The report does not address how Vermont's forests will also be under pressure to fuel new biomass proposals from out of state, including New York State, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Currently Burlington's

McNeil biomass power incinerator receives ½ to 2/3 of its wood from out of state, primarily from New York.

Despite the grueling economic climate for taxpayers, the BEWG recommends increasing taxpayer subsidies for biomass energy and gutting the Section 248 permitting process for new biomass energy facilities.

Josh Schlossberg, of East Montpelier said, “I am disappointed by the Biomass Working Group’s final report, which I fear will divert taxpayer subsidies that Vermonters want going to community-scale, non-smokestack renewable energy projects such as solar, small wind and micro-hydro to a dirty and inefficient form of electricity generation that pollutes the air, worsens climate change, and degrades forests.”

Chris Matera, of MA Forest Watch, said, “There is nothing ‘green’ about forcing citizens to subsidize cutting, burning and belching New England forests up dirty smokestacks which will increase pollution, carbon emissions and deforestation for tiny amounts of energy we do not need. Instead, we need to transform to genuinely “clean and green“ energy options while protecting our forests so they can continue to attract tourist dollars, shelter wildlife and clean up the mess we have already made of our air, water and atmosphere.”

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