



EXPERT BLOG > SASHA STASHWICK

Health Groups to Congress: Burning Biomass is Bad for Health

September 14, 2016

Sasha Stashwick

The environmental impacts of burning biomass for electricity are well documented. When power plants use biomass as fuel—in particular biomass that comes from forests—they can [increase carbon emissions](#) compared to coal and other fossil fuels for decades. The biomass industry also [imperils some of our most precious forests](#). But this week, it's the medical and public health community that's speaking out about the ills of biopower. In a powerful new [letter](#) signed by the Allergy & Asthma Network, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Lung Association, American Public Health Association, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, National Association of County & City Health Officials, National Environmental Health Association, and Physicians for Social Responsibility, the health community's message is clear:

“Biomass is far from “clean” – burning biomass creates air pollution that causes a sweeping array of health harms, from asthma attacks to cancer to heart attacks, resulting in emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and premature deaths.”

The groups urge members of Congress to protect human health by rejecting policies that drive more biomass-burning and supporting the development of truly clean energy, such as solar and wind, instead.

From emissions of particulate matter (aka soot), nitrogen oxide, which contributes to ground-level ozone pollution, various carcinogens, and carbon monoxide, it's clear that the air pollution created when power plants burn biomass is toxic and dangerous. The letter details a litany of public health impacts from this pollution, including asthma attacks, headaches, nausea, dizziness, links to reproductive and central nervous system harm, and in some cases premature death. As the letter details, the most vulnerable members of our communities, including infants and children, older adults, individuals with respiratory or cardiovascular disease or diabetes, and individuals with lower incomes, are most at risk.

And because burning forest biomass actually contributes to climate change at time when we need to be rapidly cutting our carbon emissions, the letter also rightly highlights the known human health threats of a warming planet, such as heat-related illnesses and deaths, vector-borne diseases, food insecurity, food- and water-borne diseases, and worsened allergy seasons, as well as greater droughts and more frequent and severe extreme weather events, both of which exacerbate health concerns.

This letter could not have come at a more important time. A broad Energy bill coming before Congress this fall includes a harmful provision mandating that federal policy treat all forest bioenergy as “carbon neutral”, regardless of its actual emissions. This would not only legislate fundamentally flawed science in order to tip the scales in favor

of an environmentally-destructive form of energy, but it's clear that it would also put more Americans' health at risk. The provision should be stripped from the Energy bill and members of Congress should heed the health community's call and oppose policies that would encourage or expand the use of biomass for electricity production.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



SASHA STASHWICK

Senior Advocate, Climate & Clean Energy Program

[Want to join the fight? We're hiring.](#)

SUPPORT OUR WORK

\$35