

*Below is a response to several news stories in the Washington Post in April 2018 that failed to clarify how domestic biomass power is produced.*

## **Administrator Pruitt Was Right to Deem Biomass Carbon Neutral**

Picture your coffee table. Is any part of it made of wood? If so, that wood likely comes from the part of a tree harvested to make forest products like furniture, lumber, cardboard and paper.

You may never have thought about this, but any tree harvest that results in products like your wooden coffee table also yields “leftovers” – parts of trees like tops and limbs that aren’t useful in making consumer wood products.

Since the 1980s, biomass power plants in the United States have used these wood leftovers, along with other unusable organic materials like nutshells and oat hulls, to make electricity. The materials U.S. biomass power plants use as fuel, typically derived from within a 75-100 mile radius, usually have no higher value. They might remain on the forest floor in a slash pile, where they can become a fire hazard under certain conditions. They might go to a landfill, where they decompose and emit methane gas. They might be diseased or underdeveloped trees that need to be removed from a forest to promote the healthy growth of other trees.

In burning these leftovers for electricity and heat, biomass power plants create value out of an organic waste product that has already consumed carbon out of the atmosphere through photosynthesis. If not used for energy, organic matter will eventually return carbon or methane to the air through decomposition or fire. Burning fossil fuels, by contrast, introduces *new* carbon into the atmosphere from underground.

Last week, Administrator Scott Pruitt directed the EPA to treat biomass power as carbon neutral. Some, of course, viewed the decision along the partisan lines that divide many of our country's policies. But in reality, biomass is something that Democrats, Republicans, scientists and the international community all recognize the value of:

- Virtually every nation with a clean energy policy and every U.S. state with a renewable portfolio standard include biomass as a clean energy option.
- Congress has voted twice to support this idea; both votes were solidly bipartisan.
- The final version of the Clean Power Plan introduced by the EPA under the Obama Administration contained the line, “The EPA recognizes that the use of some biomass-derived fuels can play a role in controlling increases of CO<sub>2</sub> levels in the atmosphere.”
- The [National Climate Assessment](#) issued in 2014 recognized the role of biomass in forest health and reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

- The Nature Conservancy CEO Mark Tercek recently posted [an article](#) on Administrator Pruitt's announcement on LinkedIn, noting that, while not all bioenergy is created equal, "using certain biomass resources such as mill residues, harvest slash and small trees from ecosystem restoration projects may support environmental benefits that wind and solar energy cannot provide."

Indeed, most scientists who have studied this issue agree that using forest residues and other agricultural byproducts to generate energy is a sound practice. There are simply not enough practical uses for these types of materials, and they can do harm if left unused. Besides, using them as fuel is much less carbon intensive than any kind of fossil fuel. We commissioned a study last year, which found that biomass emits 115% less carbon than natural gas over a 100-year timeframe.

The nation's fleet of biomass power plants produces about 1% of America's power. Biomass is "baseload" – meaning that it serves as a constant source of energy that can balance out the high volumes of intermittent sources of power like wind and solar. The presence of a biomass power facility in a regional forest market contributes significantly to the local economy. Biomass not only helps keep loggers in business, it can help encourage landowners to preserve their forestlands.

Biomass can also be an important tool for promoting forest health and mitigating wildfire risk. California is currently experiencing a forest crisis with an estimated 100 million dead or dying trees across the state. The state has mandated that utilities purchase power from biomass plants because they are able to put to use the massive amounts of wood fiber that must be cleared out of the forests to protect homes and wildlife. Even in the absence of a crisis, the [U.S. Forest Service views sustainable woody biomass utilization](#) as an important tool for forest management.

Despite all of these attributes, biomass is struggling to compete in some areas of the country. Natural gas has offered sustained, low prices, and wind and solar are subsidized far beyond biomass. Recognizing the carbon benefits of biomass is a huge, appreciated step in the right direction, but more policy must follow to properly value the societal benefits of biomass.

As long as there are wood products like coffee tables, there will be wood leftovers. Biomass power presents a practical solution to disposing of these leftovers while putting renewable energy on the grid.

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