

COMMENTARY

Forest Biomass

Michael T. Goergen Jr.



Congress could miss an enormous opportunity to advance American energy independence through healthy forest management. President Obama has committed to producing 25% of the nation's energy from renewable resources by the year 2025—a goal that is both laudable and achievable. To succeed in this endeavor, we will need to produce energy from all renewable sources, including our country's abundant supply of forest biomass. Foresters and other professionals committed to maintaining the resilience of our forests understand that utilizing this renewable resource will both help us achieve energy independence and, in tandem, provide incentive for healthy forest management.

Some of those lobbying Congress on behalf of special interests have warned of dire consequences for our nation's forests if they were included within renewable energy mandates. What they don't understand is that we have the science, technology, practices, and foresters on the ground across the United States to sustainably manage forests. Such management includes planting, selective thinning and harvesting, and the removal of "woody" biomass. While the removal of woody biomass can inure the health of forests, it also provides a renewable resource, which has the potential to make a significant contribution to our energy needs. Although Congress is currently considering the role of forest biomass in energy and cap and trade legislation, previous bills are so restrictive that energy from forest "woody" biomass will never achieve its potential. This is a pattern that began with a new law (passed in 2007) creating a Renewable Fuel Standard that does not allow biomass from federal forests and only allows biomass from a fraction of private forests to count as "renewable." One-third of the United States is forested, and Congress won't allow most of it to contribute. This undercuts efforts to ensure forest health and add a valuable renewable resource to meet our energy independence goals. It doesn't have to be this way.

The arguments against using forest biomass are based on the uninformed belief that, if we produce renewable energy from forests through management, our forests will be destroyed or diminished quantitatively and qualitatively. This is simply not true. In the United States, we have as much forested land as we did over a century ago. Indeed we have about the same amount of forestland today as we did in 1907. We have maintained forests despite an increase in population from 87 million to more than 300 million during the past 100 years and all the resources

those people have consumed—and continue to consume. Forests have always been a bountiful resource in the United States. Throughout our history they have provided clean water, recreation, building products, paper, and even fuel for our growing nation.

Of course, the reason we have the vast domestic forests we have today is precisely because we have managed them. Forests are not static; they are dynamic living entities. Trees grow, trees die, and biomass is created. Biomass removed from the forest, through sound and sustainable forestry practices, enhances this natural process. Today, our forests can provide us with the fuel we need to grow our economy in a sustainable fashion, reduce carbon dioxide emissions, produce jobs, and reduce our dependence on oil. We have been generating power from forests in places from North Carolina to Northern California for decades. The forest products industry already generates 70% of all its power from biomass energy, mostly from residual material from the manufacturing of the lumber that builds our homes and the paper we use in myriad ways every day. The generation of this renewable power should be counted in measuring our renewable energy goals. It doesn't make sense to encourage new renewable energy without recognizing an industry that has been producing it for decades.

Allowing all forests to contribute will lead to more investment in forest land. Markets for low- to no-value material like biomass provide opportunities for landowners to reap more value from their forests while simultaneously enhancing wildlife habitat, water quality, and even scenic beauty. Most importantly, this additional revenue stream for forest landowners can help them keep their forests forested, rather than selling them for development. Furthermore, land that doesn't produce high quality crops could be used to grow forests. We could actually create more forests in the United States if we let science and common sense dictate legislative incentives. If we discriminate against forests, however, then we may see forests cut down to produce other crops with higher value.

Although the majority of US forestland is controlled by private landowners, federal forests can play an important role in energy production as well. Every year millions of acres of trees burn in catastrophic wildfires. This is due mostly to the overstocking and unhealthy state of federal forests. These mega-fires pollute air, watersheds, and adversely impact wildlife habitat and communities alike. They spew millions of tons of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases into the air. But with the right management, such as thinning forests and restoring resilience, we could greatly reduce catastrophic wildfires. Many of the byproducts from forest thinning have little commercial value, but if there were incentives to use them in biomass energy production, these programs could help pay for themselves.

Michael T. Goergen Jr. (goergenm@safnet.org) is executive vice-president and CEO of the Society of American Foresters.