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Fight Gears Up on Biomass

By [MATTHEW L. WALD](#)

There is evidently no form of energy, including renewable energy, that lacks opposition. A big spat right now centers on biomass power plants.

Biomass is a broad category that encompasses everything from burning whole trees to burning leftover wood chips, agricultural residues or household garbage. The focus of the argument is currently in Massachusetts, where state regulators are considering [raising the bar for biomass plants](#).

Supporters say that cutting down trees to make electricity is carbon-neutral, because the trees will regrow and absorb carbon dioxide from the air. But a recent study suggests that the trees will take years to do that, offering little short-term help. (The same argument can be made about solar cells; manufacturing them involves releasing carbon dioxide, then takes some time to break even before yielding a net benefit in decreased carbon dioxide emissions.)

Biomass is a favored form of renewable energy because its generation can be reliably scheduled; the wind and sun can merely be predicted, and not always very well, leading to a need for [extensive storage](#).

Now a group in Cambridge, Mass., is mounting a more direct assault on harnessing biomass: the Biomass Accountability Project is trotting out experts in medicine and forestry to argue against such power generators.

Margaret Sheehan, a lawyer with the group, argues that even if new biomass plants meet all Environmental Protection Agency regulations on air emissions, generation could still endanger human health because the standards are inadequate. For emissions of very small soot particles, she said, “there is no safe known limit.”

That position has some support, [particularly in New England](#). “We cannot afford to trade our health to meet our energy needs,” the American Lung Association of New England said in a [position statement](#) issued in December. Biomass plants can emit several pollutants harmful to the young, the old and people with respiratory problems, the group said.

But on the other side, the Biomass Power Association is gearing up to fight the notion that burning trees adds to carbon in the atmosphere. The group's member companies use wood scraps from trees that were cut down for other purposes, said Bob Cleaves, the group's chief executive. The association also [argues](#) that the study Massachusetts is using is misleading.

"The carbon cycle is beneficial," Mr. Cleaves said. "Biomass energy should be supported."

The arguments on both sides lost a bit of vigor when the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, scaled back plans for an energy bill. While many states have standards for embracing renewable energy, a national standard seems elusive to many or even off the table. Some Democrats are [still pushing](#) for it, though.