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ENERGY POLICY:

Senators unmoved by growing anti-biomass pushback

[Geof Koss](#), E&E reporter

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The Rio Bravo biomass power plant in Fresno, Calif. Photo courtesy of IHI Power Services Corp.

Key senators are rejecting mounting criticism by nongovernmental organizations over legislation intended to steer federal policies toward recognizing biomass as a carbon-neutral renewable energy source.

Environmentalists for months have criticized an amendment added to the Senate energy bill, [S. 2012](#), that would direct U.S. EPA, and the Agriculture and Energy departments, to craft a coordinated policy on biomass that reflects "the carbon-neutrality of forest bioenergy."

Similar provisions in House and Senate spending bills also reflect lawmakers' desire to encourage the use of biomass as a power source, which has been dogged by the question of associated carbon emissions ([E&E Daily](#), April 21).

But a coalition of leading public health groups upped the ante in the debate this week by [urging](#) Congress to reject any provision that would increase the use of biomass, questioning whether it's carbon-neutral, and pointing to releases of particulate matter and other conventional pollutants ([E&ENews PM](#), Sept. 13).

And in a blog post this week, the Natural Resources Defense Council said lawmakers "should heed the health community's call and oppose policies that would encourage or expand the use of biomass for electricity production."

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Senate Energy and Natural Resources Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) — who also leads the energy reform conference committee and the panel charged with environmental spending — said this week she remained supportive of the biomass amendment. It passed without objection, she noted.

Murkowski said biomass is commonly used as a heating and power source in her state, and argued that technological advances minimize emissions of particulate matter and other pollutants.

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"To suggest that just burning wood delivers the same kind of emissions belies the technologies that we're using nowadays with so many of these facilities," she said. "I don't have the same stress level over the biomass provision that we've got with some people."

Energy and Natural Resources Committee ranking member Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.), who co-authored the energy reform bill, acknowledged the controversy this week.

U.S. biomass power facilities



[Click here](#) to view a PDF of the map. Map courtesy of the Biomass Power Association.

"We tried to perfect that portion of the bill, and I'm sure we're going to have more discussion about it," she said. "I think everybody agrees on what they want the language to mean, but not everybody agrees that that language means what it says."

Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), who co-authored the disputed provision with Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), said yesterday that she was frustrated by the pushback.

"I am very disappointed and surprised that some of the environmental groups and public health groups have taken this position because this is a form of energy that virtually all reputable scientists agree has some carbon benefits," she told *E&E Daily*.

"They may disagree on whether it's carbon-neutral or not, but most agree that it has carbon benefits," Collins said. "And if we have fewer emissions as a result of using biomass rather than burning oil, that is a positive development."



20 October 2016



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She said the dispute stems from "a lack of understanding about how the forest products industry works and that leaving the debris — the slash — from wood operations, the wood is going to decay and release carbon."

Deal breaker?

In a phone interview this week, Biomass Power Association President Bob Cleaves echoed the point, saying the NGO complaints ignore "real world" conditions, such as those in drought-stricken California, where tens of millions of dead trees are being burned in incinerators to reduce wildfire risks.

"This is an environmental catastrophe in the state of California," Cleaves said. "If you were to take those same trees and use those trees for energy in biomass plants, which is what that Senate and House provision addresses, then the exact opposite from a public health standpoint is happening.

"In other words, there is a 90-plus percent reduction in all of the important pollutants that we need to care about from a public health perspective if we divert biomass to energy plants and not openly burn them."

That fact gets lost in the broader debate over biomass, Cleaves said.

"So this is not a theoretical discussion about going out and harvesting whole forests, as opposed to keeping those forests wild and natural," he said. "That's not what this industry is about, we are solving an environmental problem that is real and can't be ignored."

California's drought struggles also illustrate the need for the "clarifying" language on carbon neutrality, Cleaves added, noting that Golden State Gov. Jerry Brown (D) recently signed legislation requiring utilities to increase the use of wood harvested from areas prone to fire risks.

"We can't have a situation where the governor of California and the Legislature of California are requiring utilities to take this high-hazard fuel because of the significant ecological problems out there, while at the same time, EPA is saying, 'We're really not sure about the carbon benefits,'" he said. "It is absurd."

Sen. Angus King (I-Maine) similarly dismissed critics yesterday.

"I have great respect for the American Lung Association. I've worked with them for years, I think they've done a great job protecting the public and the environment, but on this issue, I think they're wrong," he told *E&E Daily*.

"It's a sustainable resource, it's not a fossil fuel. It's a transition energy source while we move further and further toward noncombustible energy resources, but I think it's a step in that direction, and like I say, it's carbon neutral."



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Should critics prevail and force the Collins-Klobuchar provision from the final energy bill, King said he may not be willing to support it.

"I would find it very hard if that provision was taken out, but I'm not going to make any predictions," he said.

Environmental groups have long been skeptical of bicameral energy bill negotiations, and at least some appear willing to see the process die rather than allow provisions they consider objectionable.

"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," said the NRDC blog.

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