



13 January 2017



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Biomass and the US EPA Under Trump

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By Bob Cleaves | January 03, 2017

In a few weeks, the past two years of election gamesmanship will end with the inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump. Since Election Day, the media and Washington insiders have been placing their bets on what the coming Trump administration will look like, and the policies it will implement, along with the Republican-controlled House and Senate. While much about the coming administration remains unknown, Trump's nominee for the U.S. EPA, Scott Pruitt, may shed light on where federal biomass policy is headed.

Pruitt, currently serving as the attorney general for Oklahoma, is a vocal opponent of federal regulatory power. A climate change skeptic, he joined a lawsuit by Republican state attorneys general to overturn the EPA's Clean Power Plan, and joined a separate lawsuit to overturn EPA regulations to limit methane from the oil and gas sector. After taking office in 2010, Pruitt established a Federalism Unit to "more effectively combat unwarranted regulation and systematic overreach by federal agencies, boards and offices."

Based on his past actions and stated preference for stronger state power, it seems likely that Pruitt, if confirmed by the Senate as EPA administrator, will weaken the agency's federal authority by strengthening state authority to regulate on environmental issues.

So how would that affect biomass? Interestingly, despite plenty of media and expert analysis lamenting the new direction that Pruitt will likely take in environmental regulation, a federalist approach to biomass doesn't diverge too far from the agency's current approach.

While the Clean Power Plan is unlikely to move forward, the plan very much left up to the states, including whether and how to include biomass in state implementation plans to reduce carbon emissions. The agency just released in December a final version of the draft model rule, which would have gone into effect for states that did not submit an implementation plan. The model rule again—and, somewhat confusingly—reiterated that the incorporation of biomass would be left up to the states.

Given a likely growing state authority on environmental regulation, we are cautiously optimistic for stronger support for biomass power. On the state and local levels, the nonpower benefits of biomass power become even more pronounced than they often are by looking at the full national power supply. Because of the current state of the power market, with fossil fuels like natural gas costing a fraction of wood fuels, we are seeing what happens when a state faces a potential reduction of power from biomass.

In 2016, California and Maine both passed measures to keep biomass power facilities online. California's tree



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mortality crisis—with 100 million dead trees on federal, private and state lands—caused many in the state, including some unexpected biomass supporters, to acknowledge the crucial role of biomass in taking on hazardous fuels. In Maine, legislators realized the importance in the wood product supply chain of biomass, which accounts for as much as a third of the livelihood of some loggers.

Many other states have implemented highly-supportive biomass power policies. Oregon has declared biomass carbon neutral. Every state with a renewable portfolio standard—some 37 states plus Washington, D.C.—recognizes the role of biomass. Minnesota, South Carolina and New Hampshire were all leaders in building models for the inclusion of biomass in their state implementation plans for the Clean Power Plan.

A decentralized EPA may be a change for some, but the biomass industry is well prepared to face these changes. As an Oklahoma state senator, EPA Administrator nominee Administrator-nominee Scott Pruitt sponsored a successful resolution supporting the development and promotion of “alternative energy” sources, including biomass. If the Senate confirms his nomination, we expect that his EPA won’t have any problems with continued state support for biomass.

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