

## The Massachusetts Sierran Spring 2010

In December 2009 the Massachusetts Sierra Club adopted a comprehensive Biomass Position Statement, including announcing its opposition to utility-scale biomass plants that will harvest huge volumes of “woody” biomass from New England forests and burn them for energy. We first told our members about this issue in an article in the Fall 2009 Sierran. In early January, the Chapter publicly released its newly adopted position statement and delivered it to the legislature.

The biomass industry is growing nationwide and working hard to have incentives and loopholes to promote biomass fuels written into the federal energy bill. Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) and other incentives to develop biomass have already infiltrated various bits of state and regional initiatives. Several largescale biomass facilities have been proposed in Massachusetts, each claiming a similar area for harvesting, and each claiming their cutting levels to be “sustainable.” Utility-scale biomass plants could devastate the Massachusetts landscape and cause a huge net increase of CO<sub>2</sub> at this time. Some proposed plants also plan to burn construction and demolition debris, which the Sierra Club opposes and which has been banned in New Hampshire. At least one coal plant in Massachusetts has proposed switching to woody biomass fuel.

In Massachusetts, the Patrick administration has decided to ask some tough questions about biomass, and we applaud this action. In response to issues raised by the Sierra Club and citizen activists and groups, the state suspended the applicability of REC in late 2009 for proposed biomass plants, pending the outcome of a study to analyze the sustainability of harvesting for biomass fuels.

However, we do have some concerns about the process. There is already credible science supporting the removal of RECs and other incentives for biomass, and it is unclear what new information this study will develop. In the mean time, facilities are proceeding to seek other permits and continuing to receive subsidies and incentives from other sources.

The Sierra Club will be watching the outcomes of the study closely, and we will keep our members apprised. The Club believes there is little likelihood that the current energy resource provided by forest biomass can be increased sustainably. There may be some room in our energy mix for smaller and much more efficient combined heat-and-power facilities that sell electricity directly to end-users or in areas that are isolated from larger distribution networks.

The Chapter will review these small-scale combined heat and power facilities on a site-specific basis. Meanwhile, voters will be asked to decide in November on a ballot initiative that would limit the expansion of biomass in Massachusetts altogether. There is some potential that small quantities of biomass fuel, sustainably harvested, could provide economic benefit to private forest landowners who otherwise would have no market for “low value” timber and may be inclined to convert lands to other uses, like development or agriculture. **But permitting even the smaller facilities raises difficult policy questions. How much is too much and where do you draw the line? How can you regulate what fuel sources a facility can use, and what happens if those sources run out? Regardless of the scale of a facility, it is the scale of harvesting that is most relevant. The impacts of multiple small-scale facilities could easily exceed that of larger facilities.**

**Neither scenario is a desirable outcome.**

*To learn more about this issue and read the Sierra Club’s full Biomass Position Statement, please visit [www.sierraclubmass.org/biomass.html](http://www.sierraclubmass.org/biomass.html)*

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