

In Our Opinion: No rush on biomass

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Biomass plants burn wood to generate electricity. Right now four proposed biomass plants for Western Massachusetts are generating a lot of heat as groups traditionally aligned on the side of energy conservation split over the merits and risks of biomass.

Because wood is a renewable resource, some see biomass plants as one way to reduce dependence on oil and other forms of fossil fuel and boost electricity output without doing further harm to the environment.

Others see a wood-burning plant as only adding pollutants to the air and posing a threat to the region's forests.

In Greenfield last week 150 people showed up for the first Zoning Board of Appeals hearing on a biomass plant proposed for an area near the town's industrial park. The hearing was postponed because the ZBA chairman was unable to attend, but the turnout is indicative of the emotions surrounding the project.

There are three biomass plants currently going through the permitting process: one along Route 20 in Russell, one in Springfield and the Greenfield project proposed by Madera Energy based in Cambridge. Biomass plants are also being discussed in Fitchburg and Pittsfield.

The biomass plants would use low-grade wood that is not suitable for lumber or other building materials. It would burn branches, tree tops, waste from tree trimming and forest harvesting operations, trees from right-of-way clearing, sawdust and clean wood scrap from manufacturing. Biomass plants would create a market for wood waste products.

Madera Energy says the plant will cost \$250 million to build and will generate 50 megawatts of power, enough electricity for 45,000 homes.

One big question is whether there is enough waste wood to power the plant.

A state-sponsored study last year reported that Western Massachusetts could generate 750,000 tons of wood waste every year. The state office of energy and environment calculates that there are 1,500 tons a day of waste within a 55-mile radius of the proposed Greenfield plant. Both sets of numbers have been challenged. Estimates are that it takes about 13,000 tons of biomass per year to generate 1 megawatt of power. To reach its proposed 50 megawatt output, the Greenfield plant would need to burn 650,000 tons of wood a year.

Because wood is a renewable energy source, and thinning forests to produce biomass fuel will encourage tree growth, proponents argue that the plant will be carbon neutral when it comes to greenhouse gases that produce global warming. That works only when taking a long view of the project.

Regarding air quality, proponents say they will be using state of the art technology to run the plant with less harm to air quality than plants that burn coal or other fossil fuels. The plant will produce emissions with hazardous pollutants, however, only further reducing the air quality in the Pioneer Valley.

As part of a broad energy strategy, biomass may have a role to play. In our opinion, there are serious concerns with the current proposals that need addressing.

First, there needs to be a better cost-risk analysis. Is the amount of electricity that a biomass plant will generate worth the added pollution it will generate?

The wood supply assessment needs an independent review. We're not confident that the state's study has not over-estimated available surplus wood and we suspect critics are low-balling the figure to make their case that the forests will be destroyed.

We share the concern of environmental groups that the Greenfield plant is being fast-tracked by the state, bypassing the traditional environmental impact reports. Ian Bowles, state secretary of energy and environmental affairs, has created an advisory group and a Technical Steering Committee to monitor the project. We understand there's a strong desire on the part of Gov. Patrick and the Legislature to cut the red tape involved in siting alternative energy facilities, but this is one project that deserves a close review. As long-time environmental activist Judy Eiseman notes in a guest column on this page today, while it is important to address energy issues, protecting the environment is equally important.

Finally, there are too many potential biomass projects in the works all at once. Part of the boom in interest is the potential for state renewable energy tax credits, which will give private developers financial leverage to borrow the capital for these projects.

Rather than let private interests race ahead, the state should select one project to study carefully and determine its feasibility and environmental impact.

Some proponents argue that state and federal agencies have the regulations in place to carefully monitor biomass plants once they are up and running. We'd rather see the job done right from the start.