

Wood-fired power plants are no environmental cure-all

November 28, 2009

IT ALWAYS seemed bizarre to think that cutting down trees and burning them for fuel could be a good way to reduce carbon emissions. And yet both the Kyoto climate change treaty and a key bill in the US House look favorably on generation not just from biofuels such as ethanol but also from so-called biomass, including wood. Fortunately, scientists are beginning to consider biomass with a more skeptical eye. Late last month, Massachusetts launched a study on whether biomass power-generation plants are sustainable - the crucial question in the debate on four plants proposed for the western part of the state.

These plants could burn wood left over from landscaping, milling operations, and forest-thinning projects. But these unobjectionable sources might not be enough to feed the plants; their operation, critics worry, would require major cuts in private and public woods, reducing the forests' ability to absorb carbon dioxide. The state's study, which will be reviewed by an independent advisory panel, should ensure that the state does not give a boost to biomass plants that harm both the atmosphere and the state's forests.

Biomass and biofuels have won privileged status in global warming agreements in part because the carbon dioxide they absorb from the atmosphere would return to it no matter what - either through burning or through natural decomposition over time. But only recently has it begun to sink in that, far from lowering emissions, leveling a forest full of carbon-absorbing trees adds to emissions - whether the trees are burned in a power plant or simply removed to clear land for biofuel crops like corn or soybeans.

In the future, utilities will be required to obtain an increasing percentage of their power from renewable sources. The Massachusetts study will inform new state regulations on whether and how biomass and biofuels facilities will qualify to meet that rule. Thanks to good marketing and good lobbying by agribusiness and forestry interests, biomass and biofuels are prominent in many discussions about green energy.

But Massachusetts should make sure that supposedly renewable energy sources don't make a global climate problem worse.■