IS "WASTE WOOD" REALLY WASTE?

The wood pellet industry and biomass electricity companies pride themsleves on using "waste wood" to manufacture wood pellets and produce energy. However, their definition of "waste wood" (also called residuals) is very different from what you would expect. It includes whole trees in cleverly named categories like "low-grade wood fiber".[1] In actuality, **wood pellet producers like Enviva are using whole trees, trunks, and limbs.**

The US exported five million metric tons of pellets in 2015. [2] Biomass facilities acknowledge that they harvest from unprotected wetlands, which are highly diverse habitats with threatened mammal, reptile, amphibian, and bird species.[3]

Harvesting forests for biomass is different than normal logging. In harvests for wood products, some trees and most slash - limbs and leaves - is left behind in order to prevent soil erosion, provide wildlife habitat, and to help build soil for forest regrowth. These piles decompose slowly, releasing carbon into the soil and atmosphere. During a biomass harvest, loggers clear-cut trees and remove limbs and leaves. The bare ground left behind warms and dries, making it difficult for plants and soil to regenerate. Unfortunately, research shows that logging may cause forests to emit more carbon than they absorb for up to fifty years.[4]

WORSE THAN COAL

When policy-makers think of bioenergy, they think of corn, or perhaps even pine plantations, being harvested for energy. They think of "waste wood" as the scraps of brush burned by farmers. They do not think of truckloads upon truckloads of trees, each day, being compressed into pellets and shipped to Europe for fuel.

The trees being harvested for biomass do not even meet Europe's ideal emissions reduction targets. Many scenarios that incorporate forest-derived wood for electricity have emissions that are worse than both natural gas and coal facilities.[5] If the end goal is to prevent the earth from warming more than two degrees Celsius, the way forward is not with the industry definitions of "waste wood" or "residuals" that result in entire forest ecosystems being fragmented, intensively harvested, and burned.

THERE IS NO WASTE IN FORESTS

There is a fundamental disconnection between how the biomass industry views forests and how they actually function. There is no "waste" in forests -- cavities and dead standing wood provide habitat to squirrels, raccoons, woodpeckers, owls, and other cavity nesters.[6] Decaying slash piles can provide nest building materials for birds, and even protect regenerating tree seedlings from ravenous deer.[7] Standing dead wood allows raptors like the magestic bald eagle to scan below for prey.

The US South is being logged at four times the rate of the the South American rainforests, and has lost more than a fifth of its forest interior in the last twelve years.[8] Since most Southern forests are not protected from logging, the biomass industry is running rampant. It is hungry for any wood that it can get, regardless of origin or potential conservation value. Although they hide behind claims of "waste wood", it is easy to see how the biomass industry is changing the landscape and destroying our forests.

---

[1] http://bit.ly/29t40VN.
[2] http://bit.ly/1HwxA6Q & http://bit.ly/29wLJY8.
[3] http://bit.ly/29HmLHe/
[4] Achat et al. (2015) Scientific Reports 5:1-10; Law & Harmon (2011) Carbon Management 2:73-84
[5] http://on.nrdc.org/1RYeqJX.
[6] http://bit.ly/24CHsau
[7] Grisez et al. (1960) Journal of Forestry 58:385-287
[8] Hansen et al. (2013) Science 342:850-853; Riiters et al. (2016) Landscape Ecology 31:137-148

DOGWOOD ALLIANCE