

FACT SHEET

THE SUSTAINABLE BIOMASS PROGRAM: SMOKESCREEN FOR FOREST DESTRUCTION AND CORPORATE NON-ACCOUNTABILITY

- The Sustainable Biomass Program is an industry initiative designed to provide assurances that biomass fuel is sustainable and legally sourced.
- A comprehensive analysis found that the program is highly deficient, contributing to an increase in carbon emissions, lost natural forests, and negative impacts on communities.
- The program uses flawed and incomplete carbon accounting, lacks independent audits and verification, and fails to provide performance-based thresholds and protections.
- The program underscores the false claim that biomass is a “carbon neutral” energy source, on par with truly clean forms like solar, wind, and energy efficiency.
- Policymakers looking to the SBP to provide assurances on the sustainability and carbon intensity of biomass fuels cannot be confident in using it.

This study by the Natural Resources Defense Council and Dogwood Alliance spotlights critical flaws in the Sustainable Biomass Program (SBP) standard. It raises serious questions about the standard’s ability to provide credible assurances of biomass sustainability and carbon emissions intensity.

Existing climate and energy policies in the E.U. provide subsidies and incentives to promote renewable energy, often characterized as “carbon neutral” energy sources. Unfortunately, and despite evidence to the contrary, these policies treat biomass energy as carbon neutral, on a par with other truly clean energy technologies like wind and solar. In fact, when all emissions are counted, forest biomass fuels such as wood pellets made from whole trees and other large-diameter wood (i.e., large tree tops and limbs) for electricity emits carbon pollution comparable to, or in excess of, fossil fuels for more than five decades.¹



Enviva Harvest Site - Outside Woodland, NC - May 2015. © Dogwood Alliance.

In response to these subsidies, utility demand for wood pellets has grown rapidly as more and more European utilities convert their coal plants to biomass plants. The export of wood pellets from the United States to the European Union (E.U.) has sky-rocketed in recent years. In 2015, 6.1 million tons of wood pellets were exported from North America, an almost four-fold increase from 2010 according to the North American Wood Fiber Review (NAWFR) issued by Wood Resources International.² Approximately 97 percent of these exports were sourced from the forests of the Southeastern United States, with most destined for the United Kingdom.³

A SELF-ASSESSMENT SCHEME FOR BIOMASS PRODUCERS

The SBP was created in 2013 by biomass companies to provide assurances that their wood pellets and other biomass fuel are sustainable and legally sourced. The partnership is also meant to provide power producers with information to calculate the purported climate benefits of burning pellets for electricity generation.⁴

However, our analysis shows that the SBP system is highly deficient in many important respects. For example, SBP procedures ignore crucial aspects of forest carbon accounting and are not based on independent assessments. The standard also allows other potentially misleading approaches to forest carbon accounting. The SBP Feedstock Standard fails to provide robust, performance-oriented thresholds and protections. Under the standard, risk assessments can be conducted with a fundamental lack of objectivity, consistency, and connection to the management of actual source forests, and rarely require on-the-ground verification.

Policymakers and other stakeholders may see the SBP's limited requirements and mistakenly think it is equivalent to more credible third-party certification approaches. However, the SBP is basically a self-assessment scheme for biomass producers, with virtually no requirements for independent on-site forest audits.

Most indicators focus on procedures rather than in-the-forest outcomes and verification measures that often have little connection to actual forest practices. This fundamentally limits the potential benefit of the SBP's narrow requirements for independent verification of the risk associated with different biomass producers.

THE SBP: A "FOREST" OF LOOPHOLES

As a whole, the SBP is more noteworthy for what it doesn't require—rather than what it does. Among its "forest of loopholes," the standard ignores both the emissions from burning biomass feedstocks and the substantial amount of forest carbon that can be lost through logging natural forests in requirements for carbon emissions claims. It also exempts potentially large amounts of biomass producers' supply areas from the SBP's core standards for forest sustainability and legality.

In light of these deficiencies, SBP-certified biomass projects will likely continue to pose significant risk to forest integrity, local communities, and our ability to reduce carbon pollution from power plants.

We caution policymakers in the United States and Europe who might look to the SBP as reassurance of biomass sustainability and its carbon benefits. We call on them to reassess their approach.

CARBON ACCOUNTING	Ignores crucial aspects of forest carbon accounting
	Exempts large amounts of high carbon feedstocks
	Permits self-assessments
	Allows the use of less relevant, regional approaches
FOREST LEGALITY & SUSTAINABILITY	Relies heavily on legal compliance as a proxy for sustainability
	Lacks concrete, performance-based thresholds
	Relies on regional risk assessments and rarely requires field verification
	Permits self-assessments
	Relies on other weak certification systems for verification
	Lacks adequate protections for biodiversity and high conservation value forests
	Permits conversion of natural forests to plantations

ENDNOTES

1 Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), *Think Wood Pellets are Green? Think Again*, May 2015, www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/bioenergy-modelling-IB.pdf (accessed January 2017). Another study on the effects of expanding biomass energy development in the Southeast found it would create "a carbon debt that takes 35-50 years to recover before yielding ongoing carbon benefits relative to fossil fuels..." Andrea Colnes et al., "Biomass Supply and Carbon Accounting for Southeastern Forests," February 2012, Biomass Energy Resource Center, www.biomasscenter.org/images/stories/SE_Carbon_Study_FINAL_2-6-12.pdf (accessed February 2017).

2 Wood Resources International LLC, "North American wood pellet exports reached record high in 2015," *Biomass Magazine*, May 4, 2016, biomassmagazine.com/articles/13224/north-american-wood-pellet-exports-reached-record-high-in-2015 (accessed January 2017).

3 European Commission, Directorate-General for the Environment. *Environmental Implications of Increased Reliance of the EU on Biomass from the South East US*. December 2015, bookshop.europa.eu/en/environmental-implications-of-increased-reliance-of-the-eu-on-biomass-from-the-south-east-us-pbKH0116687/ (Accessed August 23, 2016).

4 Sustainable Biomass Program, "About us," The Sustainable Biomass Program Limited, www.sustainablebiomasspartnership.org/about-us (accessed August 22, 2016).