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Nation

## Report: Loophole in Climate Bill Could Level Forests

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[Dave Thier](#) Contributor

(June 16) -- The Senate climate bill, already controversial, contains a loophole that allows utility companies to discount all emissions from burning biomass fuels, according to a [report](#) released today by environmentalists.

That flaw could effectively erase 80 percent of the bill's promised carbon dioxide reductions and provide a taxpayer subsidy for cutting down millions of acres of trees, the report says.

"Biomass" is a catch-all term that could refer to silage, grasses, sawdust or waste wood or fresh trees. The proposed legislation treats all sources of biomass equally, but environmentalists worry that power companies are going to start using trees. And there is a world of difference between burning unused cornstalks and cutting down forests for fuel, they say.

"Logging and burning trees will produce a near-term surge in carbon releases -- greater than from burning coal -- while eroding for decades the forests' ability to recapture those emissions," reads the report, written by Mary Booth, an independent researcher working with the Environmental Working Group.

According to the report, the increase in biomass burning associated with the bill's renewable energy goals may require the destruction of 18 million to 30 million acres of forests.

The climate bill, authored by Sens. John Kerry and Joseph Lieberman, has been under attack from both the right and the left. One of its most ambitious goals appeared to be in the power sector -- mandating that 25 percent of the nation's energy be produced from renewable sources by 2025.

The report further muddles what exactly qualifies as "renewable" energy, which has been a point of conflict among policymakers, industry representatives and environmentalists.

The essential logic behind discounting emissions from burning biomass is that while burning plants does release carbon into the atmosphere, those plants will sequester an equivalent amount of carbon when they grow back.

But Richard Wiles, senior vice president for policy at the Environmental Working Group, argues that that accounting only makes sense for single-season crops like switch grass or cornstalks.

"Those trees won't grow back and sequester that carbon for decades," he told AOL News. "When it comes to trees, the reductions are all fake."

Supporters of biomass burning argue that most biomass plants run off waste wood and logging byproducts, but environmentalists doubt whether proposed facilities would be able to fulfill their claims of energy production off of those materials alone.

John Kerry's office did not respond for comment.

Wiles speculates that the best way to seal the loophole would be to stipulate in the bill that in order for biomass fuel to be called sustainable, it would need to be able to grow back in a certain number of months.

Last month, 90 scientists [sent a letter](#) to congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid urging them to

differentiate between different kinds of biomass fuels in any climate legislation where they referred to the proposed carbon accounting as a way of cooking the books on emissions reporting.

Some environmentalists have already begun to challenge local plants in advance of national legislation. In Ohio, environmental groups have challenged a massive expansion to biomass burning that, according to Cheryl Johncox of the Buckeye Forest Council, could mean cutting down up to every 10th tree in the state.

"This is a huge sucking machine that is going to eat a lot of wood," she told AOL News.

In Massachusetts, the state put a six-month moratorium on licensing new biomass plants and recently released [a report](#) stating that biomass burning was not carbon neutral.

The issue of a biomass loophole [has also been a point of contention](#) in the rest of the world. At the Bonn, Germany, climate talks last week, a number of poorer nations have accused Russia, Australia and the European Union of using a "logging loophole" to cheat their goals of emissions reductions.

Pundits disagree about how the continuing disaster in the Gulf of Mexico will affect the climate bill's chances of passing, but for many, the oil spill has highlighted a need to move toward renewable fuels. As the argument over trees reveals, however, even that can be a tricky term.

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