

Clear-cutting, the biomass fallacy and global warming

Background

Our Federal and Provincial governments along with over 500 municipal and town councils have declared climate emergencies. The link between rising atmospheric levels of climate pollutants, primarily CO₂, and global warming is well established. Scientists worldwide agree that reducing carbon emissions is crucial to reining in global warming.

Nova Scotia has set ambitious carbon reduction targets. A major goal is to stop using coal for power generation. A decade ago, biomass was considered more climate-friendly than coal, because trees can regrow in 50-100 years, whereas coal takes millennia to be produced. Utilities around the world converted coal-fired plants into biomass burners, supported by major subsidies to reduce use of fossil fuels.

Key Issue

Nova Scotia also followed the mantra “trees grow back”, placing biomass on the list of renewables for power generation. There are major problems with this. Most fundamentally, the time needed for a tree to grow back vastly exceeds the time we have to turn around the climate crisis (contrast the 4-5 years scientists tell us that we have with the 50-100 years most trees need to reach maturity). Furthermore, generating electricity from biomass liberates more CO₂ per KWH produced than burning coal.

This is not a new problem. A petition against the use of biomass for power generation garnered over 30,000 signatures 5 years ago. The Healthy Forest Coalition arose from the strong response to that petition.

In the aftermath of the closure of Northern Pulp, Nova Scotia’s major market for low grade wood products disappeared. Promoting power generation from biomass provided a market. Even though producing electricity from biomass is more expensive than using natural gas or coal, Nova Scotia Power was obliged to increase its generation of electricity from biomass by an order in council requiring the utility to buy more “renewable” energy from within Nova Scotia. The government presented this as a temporary measure, but such measures have a way of becoming permanent.

Turning Nova Scotia’s forests into chips for biomass power plants is not sustainable. Forests are one of our best means of sequestering carbon. Maintaining Nova Scotia’s forests would reduce our carbon footprint much more effectively than the substitution of biomass for natural gas or coal for power generation.

Recommendations:

- 1) Remove biomass from the list of renewables for power generation
- 2) Prohibit the export of wood chips manufactured from Crown-owned timber for overseas power generation.

4) Favour sustainable forestry

It is high time that we adopt ecological forestry practices. Adopting forestry that maintains multi-aged Acadian forests will help reduce our carbon footprint, favour carbon sequestration and help limit global warming.

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