



Western Forestry Leadership Coalition Issue Brief: GAO Report on Use of Woody Biomass for Energy May 25, 2006

Background

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) was asked to explore obstacles that are impeding the use of woody biomass for energy. In the past, the GAO has reported that the most critical barrier to effective use of the technology is the high cost of harvesting and transporting the material, along with an unpredictable supply in some locations. In many areas, public buildings and some businesses are beginning to utilize biomass for heating and electricity; GAO was also asked to investigate these success stories and report back to Congress on lessons learned. The agency identified 13 biomass users located across the country and conducted in-depth interviews at each location. GAO provided this information during testimony before the House Resources Committee Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health on April 26, 2006. Other witnesses at the hearing included Marcia Patton-Mallory, current Biomass and Bioenergy Coordinator and former WFLC member, and Ryan Temple, a Program Director with Sustainable Northwest.

Report Highlights

GAO investigators found that the most important factor facilitating biomass use was the availability of financial incentives or benefits. Users cited government grants as well as cost savings in their energy bill as deciding variables. Several of the users interviewed by GAO also discussed the importance of an affordable and reliable supply of woody material. Finally, users cited environmental benefits, such as reduced emissions and improved forest health, as factors that contributed to their decision to use woody biomass for energy.

Challenges associated with woody biomass usage included insufficient supply. Slightly more than half of the users interviewed said they found it difficult or impossible to obtain a sufficient supply of material, resulting in sub-capacity operations for some. Several noted that supply from federal lands was particularly uneven, causing them to rely more on private land, sawmill residues, and urban wood waste for their source of woody material.

GAO investigators concluded their testimony by making several recommendations for promoting greater use of woody biomass. First, they noted that glitches in supply from public lands can easily result in biomass facilities that use less expensive wood residues from nearby mills. As a result, the facilities are able to remain operational, but small diameter trees are not being used as intended and forest health remains un-impacted. Second, government agencies were urged to consider local logging and milling infrastructure when they seek to develop a biomass facility in an area. Without a functioning logging industry in place, supply can be very inconsistent. Finally, federal agencies would do well to consider potential biomass users when they plan forest thinning projects. Larger-scale users such as pulp or paper mills are particularly likely to benefit from an assured federal supply.

For More Information

To view the GAO report, see www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-336

For questions or comments, contact: Lisa Dale, Governmental Affairs Director
Western Forestry Leadership Coalition
303-445-4363; lisa.dale@colostate.edu