



Fuel for Flames or Fuel for Energy - It's Time for Congress to Choose

By Bill Crapser, Council of Western State Forester Chair and Wyoming State Forester

Anyone listening to the news or traveling across the west knows that much of our forests are in flames, or dead/dying from bark beetles. According to the National Interagency Coordination Center approximately 1.6 million acres nationally burned in wildland fires in 2007. Of those acres, 78% were in the west. The USDA Forest Service estimates that over the next 15 years, 22 million additional acres of western forests, on both federal and non-federal lands, could experience significant tree mortality from bark beetles. Our nation's forests have problems, and the west is seeing more than its share.

Let's imagine if you will, that we could thin the forests to improve forest health, reduce wildfire severity and then recycle that wood waste, or biomass, into renewable energy. A key component to maintaining America's national security and the health of our economy is our ability to develop alternative sources of energy and fuel thereby reducing our dependence on foreign oil and emissions of harmful greenhouse gases.

We don't have to imagine, it is happening right now all over the west. According to a recent report by the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition eleven of the seventeen western states surveyed have public facility biomass heating systems operational and another five states have projects in progress. Biomass systems are clean-burning, make a positive contribution to reducing emissions that contribute to climate change, and create local, often rural, jobs. America's forests constitute a valuable and renewable resource and wood holds a vast potential as a fuel source.

A good example of biomass being converted to renewable energy is the Snowflake White Mountain Biomass Power Plant in Arizona. The plant is generating electricity through a wood-burning boiler using forest thinning (wood-waste material) and waste recycled paper fibers. At least 75 percent of the Snowflake plant's production will be generated by forest-thinning efforts occurring on U.S. forest lands that surround the communities of Arizona's White Mountains.

Here lies the latest roadblock in the reuse of wood waste for renewable energy, according to Congress wood from federal lands cannot be defined as "renewable biomass." The Energy Independence & Security Act of 2007, signed into law in December, 2007, includes a historic 36 billion-gallon renewable fuels standard (RFS) goal, a portion of which will be reached through the use of woody biomass. However, a last-minute change in the legislation's definition of renewable biomass prevents wood waste from federal lands—such as trees, wood, brush, thinnings, chips and slash—from counting toward the RFS mandate. By not being "counted" toward our national goal, the projects that depend on the supply of wood waste from national forests are less likely to receive funding. Investment during the initial stages of these projects is the key to their success.

With the increased demand for renewable energy and the need to protect communities and forests it is a perfect fit to turn wood waste into a clean burning, renewable source of energy. Testimony will be given on Thursday, July 24th to the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy and Research on this issue. My colleague, Butch Blazer - New Mexico State Forester, will be urging Congress to serve the public well by re-defining the definition of renewable biomass to allow materials from federal lands to be 'counted' towards our Country's goals for renewable fuels in the future.

Bill Crapser is the Wyoming State Forester and Chair of the Council of Western State Foresters. July 18, 2008. You can reach the Council at www.westernstateforesters.org or 303.445.4365