



SUPPORT S.2136/H.3210

An Act to remove woody biomass from the greenhouse gas emissions standard for municipal lighting plants

Introduced by Sen. Adam Gomez (Hampden) and Rep. Orlando Ramos (Chicopee/Springfield)

BILL PURPOSE:

This legislation removes biomass from the list of energy sources that Municipal Lighting Plants (MLPs) can use to meet the new MLP Greenhouse Gas Emission Standard that was created under the 2021 Climate Roadmap law. Without this change, biomass will automatically qualify as a “non-carbon emitting source” for this program starting January 1, 2026.

THE ISSUE:

Biomass power plants emit 50% - 60% more CO₂ per megawatt-hour than modern coal plants. Even assuming trees grow back, net CO₂ emissions from burning forest wood exceed emissions from fossil fuels for decades to over a century. Generating electricity with wood is hugely resource-intensive, as well, for instance requiring more than an acre’s worth of wood per hour to fuel a typical 50-MW power plant. Adding to the danger, biomass plants emit large quantities of fine particulates (PM_{2.5}) and other harmful air pollutants, and are disproportionately sited in low-income communities and communities of color, contributing to environmental injustice.

Last year, the Legislature removed woody biomass from the list of eligible sources for Massachusetts’ Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) on the principle that it is a harmful, polluting energy source and should not be eligible for “clean” energy subsidies. Massachusetts should have a consistent policy regarding the treatment of woody biomass energy. Allowing MLPs to treat biomass as a “non-carbon emitting source” is not only contrary to science, it also seriously undermines the Legislature’s intent and the Commonwealth’s ability to meet its climate goals.

BACKGROUND:

Municipal lighting plants supply approximately 14% of electricity used by Massachusetts residents. However, they are not required to comply with the Renewable Portfolio Standard, which requires investor-owned utilities to purchase a certain percentage of renewable energy credits each year.

In 2021, the Legislature passed *An Act Creating a Next-Generation Roadmap for Massachusetts* (Chapter 8 of the Acts of 2021), which created a Greenhouse Gas Emission Standard (GGES) for MLPs. The law sets a minimum percentage of “non-carbon emitting energy” sold by each MLP to their retail

electricity customers, as follows: (i) 50% non-carbon emitting energy by 2030; (ii) 75% non-carbon emitting energy by 2040; and (iii) energy sales achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Unfortunately, the Legislature included biomass, without limitations, in the list of “non-carbon emitting sources.” This was a significant deviation from Massachusetts’ other clean energy statutes and programs, such as the RPS, the Alternative Energy Portfolio Standard, and the Clean Energy Standard (310 CMR 7.75), which all recognize biomass power as a carbon-emitting source.

In response to public concern, the Legislature delayed the inclusion of biomass by five years, allowing time for the Executive to prepare a study on the health and environmental impacts of biomass energy that was required under Section 102 of the law. However, pursuant to Sections 34 and 112, biomass fuels will automatically be added to the list of “non-carbon emitting sources” as of January 1, 2026.

WHY THIS LEGISLATION IS NEEDED:

The MLP Greenhouse Gas Emission Standard creates a major loophole for biomass power plants across the Northeast to market their dirty power to MLPs, with no restrictions whatsoever. As MA and other states in the Northeast, including NY and CT, end or scale down subsidies for biomass power plants, the new markets created by this law could be a lifeline for the industry. The Legislature must close this loophole now, before MLPs lock in their energy contracts for 2026 and beyond.

Because they are so expensive to build and operate, biomass power plants rely heavily on subsidies and long-term power purchasing contracts. For instance, Palmer Renewable Energy (PRE), the company seeking to build a controversial 42-MW biomass power plant in East Springfield, MA, aggressively pursued long-term contracts with MLPs in MA and RI. As of 2020, at least 8 Massachusetts MLPs had signed 20-year agreements with PRE to purchase approximately 75% of its power. PRE is currently in court challenging local and state decisions revoking the plant’s permits.

This legislation corrects an unintended consequence of the new MLP standard, which was intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but as written provides incentives for the continuation and growth of the biomass power industry in Massachusetts and throughout the Northeast.

STRONG SUPPORT IN MASSACHUSETTS FOR ENDING BIOMASS SUBSIDIES

Massachusetts groups strongly support ending subsidies for burning woody biomass. More than [100 organizations](#) supported legislation last year to remove woody biomass from the RPS and APS.¹ In addition, Governor Maura Healey pledged to end subsidies for forest bioenergy for electricity as part of her [climate platform](#), stating that “Burning wood for bioenergy depletes our forests, increases greenhouse gas emissions, and is a threat to human health.”²

PFPI urges you to support and co-sponsor S.2136/H.3210, *An Act to remove woody biomass from the greenhouse gas emissions standard for municipal lighting plants.*

*For further information please contact James McCaffrey, New England Legislative Director,
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¹ <https://www.pfpi.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/100-group-letter-to-conference-committee-5.20.2022.pdf>

² <https://maurahealey.com/issues/climate/>