

460 Totten Pond Rd., Suite 400
Waltham, MA 02451
Tel: (781) 890-4262
Fax: (781) 890-4280

393 Maple St.
Springfield, MA 01105
Tel: (413) 737-3506
Fax: (413) 737-3511

1-800-LUNG USA
lungne.org

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November 16, 2009

The Honorable John F. Kerry
One Bowdoin Square
Tenth Floor
Boston, MA 02114

Dear Senator Kerry,

My name is Scott Keays and I am the Public Policy Manager for the American Lung Association in Massachusetts. My reason for contacting you today is to encourage you to: (1) NOT grant Renewable Energy Credits to biomass, as well as, (2) to NOT grant any other preferential treatment of biomass in any of the energy or climate change legislation.

Although often praised because of its renewable quality, the American Lung Association in Massachusetts views biomass burning as a significant source of air pollution. Burning wood, like burning any other substance, releases toxic chemicals and particles which can negatively affect both the environment and respiratory health. In particular, biomass emissions contain fine particulate matter, sulfur oxides, carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, and various irritant gases such as nitrogen oxides that can scar the lungs. Like cigarettes, biomass emissions also contain chemicals that are known or suspected to be carcinogens, such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and dioxin.

For vulnerable populations, such as people with asthma, chronic respiratory disease, and those with cardiovascular disease, biomass and diesel emissions are particularly harmful. Even short exposures can prove deadly. An increasing number of studies are pointing to the direct impact of increase particle pollution levels and an increase in heart attacks. The particles produced by biomass and diesel emissions are extremely small and are unable to be filtered out of our respiratory system. Instead, these small particles end up deep in the lungs where they remain for months, causing structural damage and chemical changes. In some cases the particle can move through the lungs and penetrate the bloodstream.

The concerns about generating electricity through biomass become even more troubling when you consider how wasteful and inefficient, this source of power is. When used strictly for electricity production, biomass plants have an energy conversion efficiency (efficiency of a device that converts one energy form into another) of approximately 20 percent. Another way to state this is that for every 4 cords of wood burned, only one actually produces electricity even though all 4 produce pollution. This statistic is even more alarming when you consider that, when combined, all five biomass plants proposed for Western Massachusetts will meet only 1% of the state's energy needs.



Like the other New England states, Massachusetts already suffers from poor air quality and has some of the highest asthma rates in the nation. As advocates for healthy air and lungs, the American Lung Association in Massachusetts believes that these facts demonstrate that our state can no longer afford to compromise our health in favor of energy production. Given the technology and the natural resources available to us, we do not believe that anyone should be forced to choose between electric power and their health. It is a false choice we need not make. The air we breathe should not make us sick, period.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Scott B. Keays, MPH
Public Policy Manager
American Lung Association in Massachusetts
skeays@lungne.org