

Biomass: Neither automatically good nor automatically bad — it all depends.

Barbara Bramble

Chair, Board of Directors, Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials and Senior Advisor,
International Climate and Energy Program
National Wildlife Federation

Biomass for bioenergy has been promoted as one solution to national energy security, essential for rural employment and beneficial to the environment. But policies to promote expansion of bioenergy should be seen in the context of biofuels mandates, and rising demand for forest products due to population growth, including for new uses such as bio-plastics and other biomaterials. Global demand for forest products is projected to double in the next 15 years, mostly due to bioenergy, and in the meantime large areas of forest are being lost to urban and agricultural expansion. These impacts are causing complex shifts in the forest products industry, and overall forest losses are releasing significant amounts of GHG emissions. Forest planning must accommodate a world of accelerating climate change, where disease, fires and droughts will add more uncertainty to long-term forest management. Another imperative is to assure that sustainable harvest practices are used to avoid significant negative impacts on soils, water resources and natural habitats and on vulnerable human communities. Use of forest products for bioenergy and biomaterials is not “good” or “bad” by category: The harvesting impacts depend on specific location and production conditions, as well as on scale. A variety of approaches have been taken to address these challenges, from best practice guidelines to minimalist legislation to voluntary standards which consider all the aspects of “sustainable” production. Voluntary certification standards programs, such as the RSB and the FSC, complement regulatory regimes to reward excellent practices, and become a force in the marketplace. Given that deforestation continues largely unchecked in many parts of the world, an important response to these challenges should be to maintain as much healthy forest standing as possible, to meet the priority needs of the future.