

Country Journal

Opinions



Editorial — Commentary
Letters to the Editor

Biomass' potential impact on forests

To the Editor:

As a local landowner, tree farmer and forestry worker since I was big enough to carry an axe, I would like to offer my thoughts on the Biomass plant's potential impact on our regional forests.

Responsible forest owners who look for any reasonable return on their investment in the land plus taxes, insurance, maintenance, all need to harvest and sell forest products. If not, the owners are inevitably compelled to sell or develop the land, so they can get their money out of the forest and into more productive investments. My family loves our forests, and has maintained several hundred beautiful and productive acres of forestland in Russell for over 50 years. Our labor of love means we are constantly considering the multitude of investment alternatives, costs and benefits, maintenance chores, supply and demand forces, govt. regulations and programs, rights and responsibilities affecting forestry. All of these influences, along with forestry practices, harvesting technologies and public perceptions have changed a heck of a lot over the past half century, and mostly for the better.

One of the newest developments that intelligent and active forest owners (and our professional foresters) welcome is the opportunity to harvest low-grade wood, i.e. Biomass, at a break-even or positive ROI (Return on Investment). For centuries, our collective forests have been raided for the most valuable trees (e.g. mature/healthy/straight oak, pine, hard maple, cherry), while there has been no reliable market for the junk, low-grade wood (e.g. soft maple, hemlock, beech and crooked/damaged/diseased trees). You might think that pulpwood and firewood would offer adequate outlets for our low-grade wood, but in fact the chronic low demand and pricing for them has produced minimal benefit to the forest or the landowner. Even modern "selective cutting" forestry (which by the way has effectively eliminated clear-cutting of the mixed hardwood forests of our southern New England region within the past 50 years),

has not been able to solve this major problem. The junk trees continually build up in the forests, crowding out natural regeneration of better quality, higher-value trees. It's identical to weeds in your vegetable or flower garden. Take a walk in any local forest or tree farm with a forester, and you will be treated to unmistakable proof of this fact. At last, in our lifetime, Biomass offers a cost-effective system and incentive for loggers and landowners to remove the treetops and "weed out" the junk trees that otherwise clog up the forest and the log landings. Biomass creates new demand on a scale that will encourage loggers to invest in the equipment and add it to their list of services, encourage landowners to get the junk wood out of their forests, and encourage the forests to re-generate with higher-quality, faster-growing, higher value trees. It's a win-win-win situation all around.

Now, the forestry question of the day is, "Won't Biomass encourage "Clear-cutting" or mass destruction of our forests?" The answer is, No. And the reason is pure dollars and sense. Why would any one in their right mind take a tree worth a thousand dollars as a sawlog, and instead chip it up into twenty-five dollars worth of biomass? That would be like you driving your nice new Lexus or Volvo to the scrap yard and collecting \$50 for the metal. Here's the take-away lesson: Biomass will never be a danger to our forests. Biomass will never create a profitable "primary" market for wood, but it will be a nice way to get paid for your trash, while cleaning up the forest environment, generating electricity we all need from renewable sources, and reducing our dependence on fossil fuels. So I guess the final question is, how silly do you think foresters, landowners, tree farmers, loggers are, that they would sell their most valuable commodities for pennies on the dollar? Even if you have no interest at all in the history, science or general facts of the matter, please at least digest this last paragraph carefully.

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