

Consider the alternatives How biomass stacks up for New England

Biomass is already thriving in Franklin County. Wood pellets sell throughout the county even as stacks of cordwood grow higher and longer. That's all biomass. It's already popular ... even though wood stoves aren't as clean and healthy as a high tech and highly monitored biomass power plant. Compare for yourself. If you can't make it to progressive and green-as-they-come Burlington, Vt., then visit the power plant at Cooley Dickinson Hospital in Northampton. Yup, hospitals use biomass. So do schools. Like Middlebury College. Another nearby facility is Pinetree: in Fitchburg (Route 2 Exit 28, a little south on Highway 31). It's adjacent to a water park and state forest recreation area. Careful, you might miss it. It looks like a warehouse.

If still doubtful, let's consider alternatives suggested by biomass critics.

Let's start with ... wind power. Clean. Natural. No carbon. Good choice?

Yup! Especially for Middle America, "where the wind comes sweepin' down the plain." Less so in New England with its hills, valleys and, ahem, trees. In Massachusetts, the best locations for wind turbines are ridge tops and seacoasts: the Berkshires and Cape Cod. Unfortunately, chapters of *Anywhere-But-Here* have stymied those wind projects for a decade.

What about Greenfield, where critics of biomass regularly champion wind power.

Well, the local *Anywhere-But-Here* folks are sure to have a fit when they learn that the best site of wind power would be the ridge running from north of Poet's Seat to south of Sachem's Head. Picture it with 16 giant wind turbines. Shorn of trees. Do the same with the ridge west of town ... and Pocumtuck Range in Deerfield ... or High Ledges in Shelburne.

Does a clean and neat biomass plant in a former quarry look a little better?

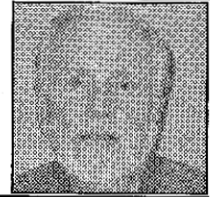
What about solar? It's another favorite of biomass critics. And a good choice ... especially for places like Arizona and California. Unfortunately, here at Latitude 42, we're closer to the Arctic Circle than the Equator. And with weather from both Canada and the tropics, the climate's fickle. For these reasons you don't see many solar panels here, despite good intentions and much talk. Even the Wisdom Way solar village needs a power plant. The buildings don't generate heat and light come dusk.

Like wind, the more favorable locations for sizable solar electric projects in New England are pretty landscapes: south facing hillsides and flat areas like Greenfield Meadows, where a solar thermal station could be built ... to provide residual heat at night.

Around here solar is helpful ... but marginal.

Geothermal? With an ambient subsurface tempera-

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ture of about 55 degrees, geothermal makes sense for heating buildings in winter and cooling them in summer. But these applications need electricity ... to run circulating pumps and heat extractors. Generating electricity from geothermal requires a geyser or volcanic magma.

Conservation? ... Commendable. We should all subscribe to energy-saving strategies. Indeed, we will when fuel prices begin climbing again ... probably next year. However, a 10 percent reduction in energy bills means we still use 90 percent of the coal, oil and gas that we did last year.

So, what about CLEAN COAL?

Now here's a prizewinning oxymoron. The euphemism folks who earn big bucks deceiving the public have high bets riding on this one. *Clean Coal!* The term would be laughable were it not so tragic.

Why?

Because Mother Nature took *hundreds of millions of years* to sequester all those early toxins, to create an animal friendly — evolutionary friendly — oxygenated atmosphere. And she took millions of years to bury the stuff under hundreds and thousands of feet of rock hard sediment.

In 15 decades, we have undone her precious work.

To deliver any kind of coal, "clean" or otherwise, you must first commit a host of ecological crimes: gorging "purple mountains majesty" in the Rockies and Appalachians, excavating "amber fields of grain" in the heartland: in the process consuming vast amounts of water, polluting rivers, damaging the atmosphere ... and harming human lives. Transporting coal to power plants then takes millions of barrels of petroleum.

Once coal is burned, huge amounts of arsenic, sulfur and other toxic residues await disposal. The TVA thought it had the process mastered, until last year, when their Kingston holding pond emptied itself into the Cinch River.

Forget about *Clean Coal* ...

In closing, let's consider a forthcoming related alternative: plug-in electric cars! They'll be coming to a dealer near you in a matter of months, not years. And be hailed for replacing gas guzzlers on highways.

But tell me ... where will we get the electricity to power *their* batteries?

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