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## **Opposition to biomass power in Mass. spurs study, suspension of RPS approval**

by Lisa Gibson

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Broad opposition to biomass power in Massachusetts has prompted the state to commission a study to determine woody biomass's sustainability and carbon neutrality as an energy generating feedstock. Furthermore, the state Department of Energy Resources has suspended all consideration of new biomass power for participation in the state's renewable portfolio standard (RPS) program until the study is concluded.

The third-party study, which will be led by the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, will look specifically at forest management as it relates to biomass collection, as well as life-cycle analysis of the carbon inputs to biomass growth, harvesting, transportation and combustion. The study should be completed in June and new rules based on the findings will be released in about a year, if necessary. It could result in stricter regulations for biomass plants in the state that wish to participate in the state RPS-15 percent by 2020, with smaller goals on a yearly basis. Participation in the program is what generates renewable energy credits, a main source of revenue and motivation for biomass power.

Bob Cleaves, president of the Biomass Power Association, says his group does not think new rules are necessary, as the same issues have been hashed out on the national level already. "The Biomass Power Association has been addressing sustainability now for some time," he said. Some local opposition groups in Massachusetts have claimed open-loop biomass power is not carbon neutral and should not be considered a renewable energy source. Cleaves said if the state agrees, it's laughable to think it can reach renewable standards without it. "They literally will have taken half the nation's renewable energy and flushed it down the drain," he said. But clearly, the anti-biomass groups have made their voices heard. "The opposition has been very, very effective," said John Bos, public information officer for Russell Biomass LLC.

The suspension of RPS consideration will likely postpone construction and operation timelines for companies proposing plants, but Peter Bos, developer for Russell Biomass LLC, said his company's timeline will already be

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pushed back because of appeals by local opposition groups. The company has proposed a 50 megawatt plant in Russell, Mass., and is considerably far along in the permitting process. Original plans were to start construction in September, 2010, but appeals can delay that process, which Bos fully expects. The opposition group, Concerned Citizens of Russell, has already appealed several of the company's permits, but each ruling has gone in favor of the plant, Peter Bos said. The suspension shouldn't draw out the delay any longer than the appeals will, he added. "That's what the opposition wants," John Bos said. "Appeals take time and time is money."

The study will take time and its main function will be to determine how much biomass is available and sustainable for biomass power plants, so the DOER will know how many plants it can approve for participation in the RPS programs, along with how large they can be, Peter Bos said. The question is not if biomass power plants can be sustained, but how many, he added.

Four biomass plants are proposed in the state, with several coal plants planning to switch to biomass power, fully or partially, Bos said. Several opposition groups have been vocal about the plants, leading to the study, along with a ballot initiative that would effectively ban biomass power by limiting gross carbon dioxide emissions to 250 pounds per megawatt hour for facilities participating in any Massachusetts RPS program. That emissions level could be nearly impossible to achieve, according to Eric Kingsley, with Innovative Natural Resource Solutions LLC. That is more than any biomass plant emits, along with any coal plant, Peter Bos said.

Burning anything releases pollutants, said John Bos, and burning wood is a much better and cleaner solution to burning coal. "Nobody is looking at the overall context," he said. Both Peter and John Bos agree that Massachusetts is the most difficult state in which to get a plant going, mainly because of the opposition and strict permitting process. Peter Bos said the Russell plant will be the most tightly permitted in all of New England. Currently, the state is home to only one 17 megawatt biomass power plant in Westminster.

If the study determines new and stricter guidelines are warranted in Massachusetts, Cleaves said the BPA is excited to work with the state to develop them, but added that he's confident the study will determine tree tops and limbs will be a sustainable feedstock for biomass power in the state.