



Wheelabrator Shasta Energy biomass plant, photo by Trip Jennings

by Jenny Blaker

We in northern California need to wake up to the insidious and growing threat of the biomass energy industry, specifically forest-based bioenergy. Bioenergy turns forests into electricity, into liquid biofuels, and into fuel pellets for export on the international market. Touted as renewable, [it is not clean, renewable or carbon neutral](#). It is devastating to human health and communities, to forests, watersheds, and wildlife habitat, and only worsens the climate crisis.

Golden State Natural Resources (GSNR) plans to build two massive fuel pellet processing plants in Tuolumne and Lassen counties, targeting 1 million tons of wood pellets per year for export, via the port of Stockton, to Europe and Asia. On June 30, 2023, 109 organizations, including scientists, doctors, environmentalists and others, [wrote to GSNR vehemently opposing](#) the project because of its potential impacts to climate, communities, and forests.

On February 28, 2024, [GSNR ratified an MOU with the giant UK energy company Drax](#), the second largest biomass energy company in the world. Drax already runs 18 fuel pellet plants in the USA and Canada. Now it is targeting California, which has 33 million acres of forests.

In a shocking [exposé of Drax in October 2022, the BBC](#) revealed that Drax is responsible for the destruction of millions of acres of mature and old growth trees in Canada and southeast USA. The company's [assertions that it uses only waste wood were proven to be false](#). Drax is by far the largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the UK. It is subsidized by UK taxpayers to the tune of around £1.4 billion (about \$1.8 billion) in subsidies up until last year.

[Toxic emissions from burning wood](#) in smokestacks have been linked to asthma, heart and lung disease, respiratory disease, birth defects, cancer, and more.

[Greenpeace has accused Drax of driving environmental racism](#) in the southeastern USA, where old growth forests have been decimated and the mainly low-income frontline communities

are struggling with health impacts from the smokestacks. In June 2023, Katherine Eglund, Chair of the Board of the NAACP Environmental & Climate Justice Committee, and Dr Krystal Martin, both from Mississippi, [spoke at Drax's AGM in London, UK](#), to inform investors about the major air pollution that has caused increased health issues among local residents, especially young children and the elderly.

Similar accusations have been made against Enviva, the world's largest wood pellet manufacturer. On March 12, 2024, Enviva [filed for bankruptcy](#). It owes over \$1.8 million to several North Carolina companies. Last year, investors filed [a class action lawsuit](#), accusing Enviva of failure to disclose material information about its finances. In 2022, [a whistleblower reported](#) that the company uses 100 percent whole trees in its pellets. He said that pellet density is critical, that "you get that from whole trees, not junk," and that Enviva's claims to be "good for the planet" are all nonsense.

It was a political decision, not a scientific one, to designate bioenergy as renewable because theoretically trees can be grown to replace those that are cut down, but in practice it takes decades – if not centuries – for trees to grow to the size of the ones they replace. Heavy equipment and machinery decimate forest ecosystems and wildlife habitat, compacting soils, leading to erosion, and run off, sometimes even landslides. Even if trees are planted, and even if they survive, the forest ecosystem, full of delicate, complex, interactions between plants, soils, microorganisms, fungi, etc. may never recover.

Bioenergy is designated as carbon neutral because of an accounting loophole, which does not take the emissions into account when the trees are cut down. Carbon is released when trees are felled, and again when they are burned for fuel. Removing trees removes one of the most effective ways to store and sequester (draw down) carbon. In addition, energy for processing,

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trucking, and shipping fuel pellets internationally, is a massive consideration. [Climate scientists worldwide](#) have said that the best thing we can do to protect the climate is to protect existing trees, particularly in mature and old growth forests.

Beware Green washing

Efforts are ramping up to try to persuade the public that biomass energy is the solution to all the wood “waste” created by the vast amounts of “vegetation management,” “thinning,” and “fuel load reduction” taking place in the name of “fire resilience” and now even “healthy forests.” In 2022, Sonoma Clean Power’s default “clean start” energy mix contained [16.4 percent biomass](#). So-called [Sustainable Aviation Fuels](#) (SAFs) are being offered by airlines, including Alaska Airlines — which flies out of Santa Rosa Airport — United Airlines, and others. Don’t be fooled. You may be flying on energy processed from masticated forests.

Biomass energy and biofuels are the other side of the coin to the “vegetation management” and “fuel load reduction” we hear so much about that are supposed to protect us from wildfire. In fact, studies show that the most effective ways to protect homes and communities from wildfire are through [home hardening and defensible space](#) up to 100 feet away. Beyond that, clearing vegetation often [exacerbates the spread of wildfire](#) by opening the way for the wind-driven, flying embers which cause 95 percent of the fires that are destructive to human lives and communities, and that dry out soils and surrounding vegetation.

Those promoting this practice now also suggest that its purpose is to promote “healthy forests.” But [what is a healthy forest?](#) Fire has been part of the California landscape for millennia. Some plants are fire-adapted and need fire to reproduce. Where foresters see com-

mercial value in timber, and see disturbances such as fire, pests, and fungi, as something to overcome, forest ecologists see an essential life support system with dynamic living ecosystems and processes. Where foresters see a dead tree as lumber, ecologists see snags, which are rich in habitat for birds and other species.

Through the eyes of the climate crisis too, wood left on the ground decays, releasing nutrients into the soil, and slowly releasing carbon. Cutting down a tree releases a large quantity of carbon all at once. Climate scientists agree that [the focus needs to be on protecting trees](#), and that cutting them down to protect them from natural processes like fire or insects makes no sense. What will the effect of all this vegetation management be on wildlife habitat, watersheds, biodiversity, and the climate – let alone the impacts of transporting, chipping, and exporting it overseas to be burned in smokestacks?

Legislation is paving the way for increased use of biofuels, and bioenergy companies are seeking federal subsidies, while Congress members Ro Khanna (D-CA) and Barbara Lee (D-CA) and others [recently sent a letter](#) to Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm and IRS Commissioner Daniel Werfel objecting to what they called the “carbon-intensive, industrial-scale wood pellet bioenergy producers” seeking an IRA tax break.

To learn more about Biomass Power Basics see <https://www.sonomacountycan.org/biomass-facts.html>

Come to the [Sonoma County Climate Activist Network](#) (SoCoCAN!) table on Earth Day at Santa Rosa Courthouse Square, for updates and action.

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We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all.

– Vandana Shiva



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guarantee supplies to Cuban children. Predictably, mainstream media outlets seized upon this development to frame it as evidence of the failure of the social experiment initiated by the late guerrilla leader-turned dictator, Fidel Castro,” as observed by [Andres Oppenheimer in the Miami Herald](#).

Dr. Jill Biden’s visit to Cuba near the end of the Obama administration symbolized hope for a continued diplomatic engagement and an understanding between the two nations. Unfortunately for the Cuban people, the gains of the Obama era have now been largely reversed by Trump and Biden. At the same time, while Vice President Kamala Harris has been focusing on curbing immigration, sanctions are one of the main drivers of migration from countries like Cuba and Venezuela.

A reconsideration of US policy toward Cuba, in favor of engagement over isolation, would alleviate the suffering of Cuban families. [It’s high time for women Democratic leaders to step forward and help reverse Trump’s harmful policies by speaking out for a return to the Obama-era approach to Cuba.](#)

So here’s a message for Vice President Harris: Taking Cuba off the SSOT list is vital to creating a world that truly works for women, as it would alleviate the disproportionate economic burden on them and strengthen their ability to thrive.

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