

VIA EMAIL

May 20, 2022

The Honorable Michael J. Barrett
Senate Chair, Telecommunications,
Utilities & Energy Committee

The Honorable Jeffrey N. Roy
House Chair, Telecommunications,
Utilities & Energy Committee

The Honorable Cynthia Stone Creem
Senate Majority Leader

The Honorable Tackey Chan
House Chair, Joint Committee on Consumer
Protection & Professional Licensure

The Honorable Bruce E. Tarr
Senate Minority Leader

The Honorable Bradley H. Jones, Jr.
House Minority Leader

Re: Support for removing subsidies for woody biomass energy

Dear Esteemed Conferees:

We write on behalf of the more than 100 undersigned organizations – and our respective hundreds of thousands of members and supporters across the Commonwealth – to urge passage of climate legislation that strengthens our clean energy programs by removing woody biomass from the list of technologies eligible for renewable energy incentives in the state’s Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard (RPS) and Alternative Energy Portfolio Standard (APS).

After several years in various forms in both chambers, this legislative priority has reached your conference committee as Sections 22-30 of S.2842. We respectfully request that the biomass provisions be preserved intact in your final bill reconciling the proposed clean energy and climate legislation under your conference committee’s purview.

The ratepayer-funded APS and RPS programs are strong and effective tools when used to incentivize clean, non-emitting energy technologies, such as wind and solar. However, ***ratepayers’ funds, and ratepayer good will, would be squandered if these programs are used for wood-burning technologies, which are more polluting than coal.***

The RPS and APS statutes must be amended to end their abuse.

By removing woody biomass from the APS and RPS statutes, the legislature will put an end to the biomass industry’s efforts to roll back Massachusetts’ landmark 2012 RPS rules. Those science-based RPS rules were hailed nationally when they were adopted a decade ago precisely because they ensured that electricity-only biomass power plants would not qualify for subsidies, due to their excessive greenhouse gas emissions and overall inefficiency. The APS regulations

that Governor Baker’s administration adopted in 2017 include weak emissions standards and forest protection guidelines for qualifying biomass heating systems. In 2019, DOER then proposed gutting the RPS regulations to match the weaker APS regulations, calling it “regulatory streamlining.” The new DOER rules, which are on the verge of being finalized, would allow highly polluting stand-alone biomass power plants across the Northeast to qualify for Massachusetts ratepayer subsidies.

Rather than tinkering with definitions and efficiency requirements from administration to administration, the provisions included in S.2842 remove woody biomass once and for all from the definitions of renewable energy in the APS and RPS programs. Such a legislative solution is the cleanest way to move forward— *so ratepayer-funded clean energy programs support non-emitting technologies, rather than combustion-based technologies.*

Wood burning is not clean.

Troubling information continues to emerge regarding the health impacts of fine particulate matter emissions (PM_{2.5}), the leading cause of air pollution-related illness and death in the United States. MassDEP cited multiple studies on the disproportionate air pollution and health impacts on environmental justice communities when it issued a letter revoking the operating permit for the proposed Palmer biomass plant in Springfield last year.¹ As for heating, although only a small fraction (less than 2%) of Massachusetts residents heat with wood, the latest EPA emissions data show that wood heating accounts for 83% of all PM_{2.5} emissions from Massachusetts’ heating sector, and 22% of the state’s total PM_{2.5} emissions. It makes no sense, from a climate or a public health perspective, to use the state’s clean energy incentives to subsidize wood burning for heat or energy.

Massachusetts ratepayers have already spent millions of dollars to promote wood-burning technologies through the APS.² The administration’s RPS changes would funnel even more millions to a polluting industry by subsidizing utility-scale economically unviable wood-burning power plants throughout New England³—plants whose smokestack CO₂ emissions are worse than coal per unit of energy generated.⁴

¹ Letter from Michael Gorski, MassDEP to Vic Gatto, Palmer Renewable Energy, dated April 2, 2021 (available at <http://www.pfpi.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Palmer-Renewables-Revocation-Final-1.pdf>).

² See PFPI, [Financial Considerations for H. 853](#), 5/5/19, pp. 2-4.

³ Booth, M. S. (2017). Maine Bioenergy at the Crossroads: Costs of a Failing Industry. Pelham, MA, Partnership for Policy Integrity (available at <http://www.pfpi.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/PFPI-Maine-Biomass-Report-4-18-17.pdf>).

⁴ See for instance PFPI, [FAQs on the Proposed PRE Power Plant in Springfield and DOER’s Plans to Weaken Biomass Standards in the RPS](#), 5/29/19. (Note that while the new RPS regulations include a carveout to prevent Class 1 RPS subsidies for power plants in environmental justice communities such as Springfield, there are no such protections in the APS or Class 2 RPS regulations.)

The climate crisis calls for immediate action.

Climate science shows that to avoid catastrophic warming, we must dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions over the next eight years and increase uptake of CO₂ that's already in the atmosphere. With such a short timeframe for meaningful climate action, it is imperative that clean energy funding and incentives be used to promote new zero-carbon-emission resources, both for heating and electricity, to displace fossil fuels. At the very least, they should not be used to support technologies that add more carbon dioxide and air pollution than fossil fueled sources.

Importantly, the biomass provisions now in S.2842 have been modified through the legislative process in the interest of fairness towards market participants. Section 82 provides for the grandfathering of facilities that have already been qualified under the existing APS and RPS regulations – while ensuring that no additional wood-burning facilities would qualify for these subsidies, regardless of when they began operation. The Commonwealth will not be able to meet its climate mandates if it subsidizes additional polluting technologies through its clean energy programs.

We urge you to include these provisions regarding woody biomass in the clean energy bill that this committee releases.

Sincerely,

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