MA Rethinks Wood-Burning Plants

STEVE LeBLANC Associated Press Writer — November 9, 2009

BOSTON (AP) — The Patrick administration is rethinking its support of wood-burning power plants, a key element of its long-term strategy to wean Massachusetts off fossil fuels.

Wood, also known as "biomass," has long been part of the state's portfolio of renewable energy sources, along with solar, wind and geothermal.

But some environmental activists say biomass power plants could lead to the clear cutting of forests while pumping more carbon dioxide into the air than coal plants, adding to global warming.

That criticism has ramped up recently in western Massachusetts.

The Patrick administration has already invested $1 million to jumpstart four proposed wood-burning plants in Russell, Greenfield, Springfield and Pittsfield as it tries to meet the goal of producing 15 percent of the state's energy needs from renewable sources by 2020.

State Environmental Affairs Secretary Ian Bowles says the administration now wants more information about the possible negative effects of the wood-burning plants.

"Difficult questions about biomass have arisen in the past year," Bowles said. "We are asking those hard questions and asking them in a way that no other states have asked them."

Bowles said he wants more information about the greenhouse gases the plants emit and how they can be operated while also maintaining forests.

Bowles is ordering a six-month study of the issue as the Department of Energy Resources develops new regulations for biomass facilities. Those regulations will establish sustainability criteria for the plants.

Biomass technology was included with solar and wind energy when the state developed its "renewable portfolio standard" in 2002. The portfolio requires utilities and other electricity suppliers to deliver an increasing percentage of renewable energy to their customers — a move designed to provide financial incentives for developers of green energy sources in Massachusetts, including biomass.

But Meg Sheehan, an attorney based in Cambridge, calls biomass "a false solution to the climate change crisis."

"They are trying to convince the public that this is clean and green when it is neither," she said. "It is an incinerator that burns wood."

Sheehan is pushing a ballot question that would severely restrict the amount of carbon dioxide the plants can emit. If supporters can gather enough signatures, the question would appear on the 2010 ballot.

Other opponents of wood-burning plants include Dr. James Wang, president of the Hampden District Medical Society, which represents about 1,000 doctors. He released a letter last month saying the proposed biomass plant in Russell presents "an unacceptable threat to the health of the citizens of the Pioneer Valley."

Biomass plant owners say it's unfair to lump in wood-burning plants with coal-burning plants.

They argue that every megawatt of power produced by wood-burning plants replaces a megawatt produced by a coal plant. They also argue that unlike coal, trees left standing can absorb the carbon dioxide released when wood is burned. And the trees cut down for fuel can be replanted. If done in a sustainable way, they say, the annual growth in trees replanted or left standing will be enough to recapture the carbon being released.

Developers of the Russell plant say it will produce 50 megawatts, enough power for about 50,000 homes. The wood will come from a 75-mile radius around the plant, including portions of eastern New York, southern Vermont and western Connecticut.

They say more than half the fuel will consist of "waste wood" — including branches cleared by tree service companies and trees cleared for development.

Bowles said the state is planning a public meeting in western Massachusetts in late November to hear concerns about the biomass plants. He said he expects the state to eventually approve stricter regulations on the plants.

"Biomass has an important role to play, but there are things we can and should do to make sure that it's not just sustainable from an energy perspective, but from a greenhouse gas and sustainable forest management perspective too," Bowles said.

Source URL (retrieved on *03/31/2015 - 8:10pm*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2009/11/ma-rethinks-wood-burning-plants