Policy Makers Should Build on Carbon-Neutral Designation of Biomass

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This week's long-awaited designation by EPA of woody biomass as a carbon neutral resource is a welcome development within the U.S. forestry sector. It's a formal recognition by the Trump administration of what wood-to-energy advocates have been saying for nearly a decade: Sustainably produced and managed forest biomass can offer valuable clean energy contributions and important carbon sequestration services to mitigate climate change, while bolstering rural communities and reducing wildfire risks.

Now, it is time to move ahead on the policies and regulations that can accelerate the development of this important energy source.

The EPA announcement follows up on a provision incorporated by Congress last spring in the fiscal 2018 budget resolution. Lawmakers urged EPA and DOE to "reflect the carbon-neutrality of forest bioenergy and recognize biomass as a renewable energy source." Through the statute, Congress asserted that woody biomass was capable of sequestering the same amount of carbon as that emitted through burning it for heat and electricity.

This week's designation has been met with the same tired criticism that some in the environmental community have been proffering over the years. These short-sighted, narrow arguments over-estimate the impact wood-for-energy has on our resources and overstate the potential for greater emissions.

In fact, there is a broad scientific consensus, both here and abroad, that holds biomass emissions are carbon neutral so long as the fuel source is sustainable. DOE's own Billion-Ton Report makes the case that the United States could produce enough biomass to support a bioeconomy, including renewable resources that could be used for energy and a vast array of products, all while providing economic, environmental, social and national security benefits. The report also says the United States has the potential over the next 25 years to produce up to four times the amount of biomass resources (which also include agricultural, waste, and algal materials) that are harvested today, all without adversely affecting the environment.

Carbon-neutral biomass is among the landscape-scale practices identified by Solutions from the Land (SfL) in its mission to facilitate the sustainable management of land to produce food, feed, fiber and energy, all while enhancing biodiversity, protecting and improving critical environmental resources and delivering high value-solutions to combat climate change.
The focused use of wood to help meet America's energy needs would not only increase the extent of the nation's forest land base, which is currently about 766.2 million acres – more than a third of total U.S. lands – but would also improve the environmental services that land provides. It also enhances rural community economic development; lowers the carbon footprint of America's energy supply; restores the health, vitality and proper functioning of many of the nation's public lands; insures the future of America's private timberlands by "keeping forests as forests"; and provides the raw materials needed by America’s forest products industry, all while supplying a growing bio-economy.

The forestry sector has its own legal and socio-economic frameworks that encourage sustainable forest management on public and private lands. These frameworks must be recognized and considered explicitly in the evaluation of biomass policy options. To maintain sustainability, forestry managers know that appropriate scale and efficiency should be kept in play.

With sustainability as an overarching principle, the use of wood for renewable energy can be a key driver in not only expanding the supply of biomass for energy, but also in enhancing and capturing the myriad of environmental services that healthy, properly managed forests provide, including: improved biodiversity, wildlife habitat, soil retention, water filtration and storage, carbon storage and recreation. All this can be accomplished while still supplying the higher valued wood and byproducts needed by the traditional forest products industry.

However, to fully realize the benefits of wood-to-energy, lawmakers and regulators at all levels must provide the policies and incentives that enhance and motivate development. Federal agencies should now go about eliminating the conflict found in some 14 different regulations pertaining to biomass currently on the books.

With EPA's recognition of "carbon-neutral" now in place, an opportunity exists to use the economic returns that this designation allows, enabling the management of woodland and forests to deliver multiple, high value solutions from the land. The designation ultimately provides win-win-win-win outcomes for land managers, the environment and local economies across the country.