

Wednesday, August 4, 2010

EPA Petitioned Over Neutrality of Biomass-Fired Power

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition last week urging the Environmental Protection Agency to “correct scientific errors” in how it calculates greenhouse gas emissions from power plants that burn biomass from trees and other wood products.

The petition, filed under the federal Data Quality Act, challenges EPA’s designation that burning trees for energy is “carbon neutral”--a term that generally implies zero effect on climate change.

The petition asks EPA to correct statements about the “carbon neutrality” of biomass in its annual inventory of greenhouse gas emissions in light of increasing scientific information showing that assumption is incorrect.

“Burning America’s forests for energy isn’t clean, isn’t green and certainly isn’t carbon neutral,” said Center attorney Kevin Bundy. “Biomass emits as much or more carbon dioxide than coal, and forests can take decades or even

centuries to pull that carbon dioxide back out of the atmosphere after being logged. In the short term--the period most critical to averting the worst impacts of climate change--converting the carbon stored in trees into global warming pollution makes no scientific or policy sense.”

The Data Quality Act requires federal agencies like the EPA to ensure the “quality, objectivity, integrity, and utility” of the data they disseminate. The Center says scientists have identified EPA’s repeated annual assumption that biomass energy generation is carbon neutral as the source of critical errors in calculating the greenhouse impacts of biomass power plants. Underestimating the effect of burning trees on the atmosphere may encourage further investment in biomass rather than cleaner technologies.

The Center’s petition also challenges EPA’s failure to consider and respond to public comments on the inventory. According to EPA’s own guidelines, public review and participation in the inventory process

is critical to ensuring the integrity and quality of the final product. Yet the Center says EPA released its final inventory document mere hours after the deadline for submitting public comments. Furthermore, the Center says a letter it submitted in conjunction with other organizations and scientists was ignored.

“Each of the past several years, EPA has reduced the time available for considering public comment, effectively shutting both the public and independent scientists out of the process,” said Nikki Reisch, a New York University law student and legal intern who prepared the petition on the Center’s behalf. “This year, EPA left itself only a few hours between midnight and morning to consider the science and the views of the public. This not only fails to inspire confidence in EPA’s final product, but also violates the law.”

Concerns surrounding biomass-fired generation have been mounting over the last year, as more biomass power plants are being announced and supported by government policies.