

Proposed Springfield Biomass Incinerator is Dangerous for Climate and Health

Burning wood, or biomass, for electricity is an outdated, unhealthy way to generate electricity. But legislation being debated in conference committee at the State House may mean a new chance at life for the proposed biomass incinerator in Springfield, Massachusetts. Appallingly, a portion of Section 15 in the current House Climate Bill unscientifically classifies commercial wood-burning biomass incinerators as sources of renewable energy that are “non-carbon-emitting.” This part of Section 15 creates new incentives for municipally-owned electric companies to purchase power produced by those incinerators, thus making the project financially viable while allowing the Indian Orchard biomass electric plant to spew more toxic pollution into Springfield.

Any burning of wood or other forms of biomass is not a carbon-neutral form of energy and will certainly exacerbate climate change and aggravate respiratory and other diseases. As physicians and health care professionals, we know first-hand the impact of climate change and poor air quality on our patients. When biomass is burned it emits particulates, toxic gases, methane, radioactive pollutants, and toxic metals (e.g., arsenic, mercury, chromium). The carbon dioxide emissions are often more significant than those from coal plants. The American Lung Association has linked exposure to air pollution to a lethal brew of diseases and conditions: cancer, cardiopulmonary diseases including heart attacks, strokes, premature death, increased emergency-room visits and hospital admissions, birth defects, abnormal lung development in children, asthma — especially in children — and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in adults.

Siting the biomass in Springfield is particularly egregious because it is an environmental justice community. Residents already suffer at much higher rates from air-pollution-related illnesses. For two years, Springfield was awarded the title “The Most Challenging City in the Country for Asthma”. Low-income residents of Springfield suffer at nearly twice the asthma rates of their counterparts in the Commonwealth and more than three times the rate of wealthier folks in the state. This is certainly linked to its poor air quality; Springfield [received an F grade](#) for ozone pollution in 2020. We can do better than to increasingly fail the residents. Science shows us that small reductions in air pollution can lead to reductions in asthma. That’s why local residents have actively opposed building this incinerator in Springfield for twelve years. The state has an obligation to help environmental justice communities improve air quality, not harm them further.

Retaining this “biomass” portion of Section 15 would encourage forest destruction not only in Massachusetts but throughout New England, further exacerbating the climate emergency that we are facing. We need our forests to stem the impact of carbon emissions.

We are at a crossroads. We can decide that these risks to our Commonwealth are acceptable and pretend we don’t know the negative climate and health impacts. Or, we can take action to protect our communities — and especially our children — from the ravages of preventable chronic diseases and the worsening of climate change. Let’s demand that our policy makers amend Section 15 by eliminating Section(c)(i)(9) “biomass” of House Bill 4933 and include only resources that are qualified under the state’s Renewable Portfolio Standard or the new Clean Energy Standard.

Steering Committee
Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility

Marty Nathan, MD
Springfield Climate Justice Coalition