



March 9th, 2021

The Hon. Charles D. Baker, Governor
Commonwealth of Massachusetts
State House
24 Beacon Street, Room 360,
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Baker,

We at Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility (GBPSR), a group of nationally-recognized experts in public health, cancer epidemiology, occupational medicine, environmental health, emergency medicine, disaster preparedness and the health effects of climate change, are writing to urge you to withdraw proposed changes to the Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard that would allow unsafe and unsustainable wood-burning power plants, such as the proposed Palmer Biomass Plant in Springfield, to qualify for renewable energy subsidies in Massachusetts.

“Burning biomass kills 2.3 million people a year worldwide,” according to public health expert Dr. Philip Landrigan, who is Director of the Global Observatory on Pollution and Health at Boston College. Biomass fuels may be theoretically renewable, but they are far from safe. Weakening Massachusetts’ stringent air quality standards translates, in essence, to abandoning our scientifically sound and cost-effective public health protections that for years have safeguarded health in the Commonwealth and resulted in substantial reductions in pollution-related disease and death.

Bending the Massachusetts Renewable Energy Portfolio Standard to designate the proposed large-scale commercial biomass power plant in East Springfield as a “renewable energy facility” will allow the plant to qualify for more than \$14 million per year in renewable energy subsidies. This politically engineered windfall will enrich the plant’s owners, but will convey no benefit to the local community. At the same time, such a policy would increase air pollution and pollution-related disease in the Connecticut River Valley. This is blatantly unjust. Moreover, the emissions from this plant will further increase climate-damaging emissions of greenhouse gases

at a time when scientists are telling us to urgently slash these emissions. This is shortsighted and reckless.

Air pollution kills more than 10,000 people in the United States and 600 persons in Massachusetts each year --a disproportionate number of them in low-income and minority communities. These men, women and children die prematurely from diseases that include myocardial infarction, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer and pneumonia – diseases that could be prevented by reducing air pollution levels in the Commonwealth. Emissions of fine particulates and other air pollutants from proposed large-scale commercial biomass power plant in East Springfield will undoubtedly increase this toll of disease and premature death, magnifying social injustice and increasing Medicare costs.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions. The World Health Organization has estimated that without reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, approximately 230,000 to 250,000 excess deaths per year from 2030 to 2050 will be attributable to climate change - and this estimate is considered conservative.

A further concern that we at GBPSR have about the proposed wood-burning plant in Springfield is that it will exacerbate social injustice in Massachusetts. Low-income communities of color in and around Springfield will be disproportionately and severely affected by the Department of Energy Resources' proposed rule changes. Springfield currently has unacceptably high levels of air pollution. Springfield has been named "the Asthma Capital of the Nation" by the National Asthma and Allergy Association because it has both the highest prevalence of asthma and the largest number of asthma-related emergency room visits in the country. Almost 1 in 5 children in Springfield have asthma, a rate twice that in Massachusetts overall.

Building a power plant in an environmental justice community that already has disproportionately high rates of respiratory disease would exacerbate the already high burden of disease and premature death by increasing levels of damaging fine particulate matter and hazardous air pollutants. These pollutants are linked to a wide range of serious health conditions, including increased rates of lung disease, heart disease, cancer and increased risk of death from Covid-19.

You and your administration have stated publicly that you intend to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions in Massachusetts by 2050. Your head of the Department of Public Health, Dr. Monica Bharel, has spoken out against structural racism. These are goals that we endorse, but we must point out to you that this proposal goes in exactly the opposite direction of both goals. Per unit of energy produced, burning wood results in 150% more carbon dioxide than burning coal and 300-400% more carbon dioxide than burning natural gas. Furthermore, although biomass has been advertised as a carbon-neutral energy solution because of the ability to plant more trees for carbon sequestration, the reality is that it takes mere seconds to burn a tree whereas it takes decades to centuries for a tree to regrow.

A negative economic consequence of this proposal that will affect all ratepayers across the Commonwealth is that it will force Massachusetts ratepayers to pay higher premiums for dirty, unsustainable energy.

In sum, the proposed large-scale commercial biomass power plant in East Springfield may only be classified as a renewable energy facility if you choose to bend the law and make that

designation a legal reality. But let us make no mistake about the fact that this facility will not be a clean operation. It will be a major source of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and the airborne waste it generates will cause unnecessary disease and premature death.

Massachusetts is in a unique position to continue to be a leader in environmental and climate justice in the nation. We urge you to safeguard the health of Springfield residents, protect our air quality and withdraw your proposed changes to the Renewable Portfolio Standard.

Thank you for your consideration.

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Chair of the Board
Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility

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