

Bioenergy Act of 2015

Summary

Managed in an environmentally responsible way, woody biomass presents a carbon-neutral alternative to fossil fuels for heating and powering homes, schools and businesses. Much of the woody biomass in the U.S. that could be used for energy production is either waste from the forest products industry, or small trees that contribute to the overcrowding of forests and wildfires. In 2013, wildfires burned 4.3 million acres of American forests and rangeland, and the federal government spent \$1.7 billion to fight them. Additionally, about 2 billion metric tons, or 30%, of U.S. carbon dioxide emissions came from fossil fuel use in space heating, water heating or electricity generation for American homes and businesses. Using woody biomass for heat and power can help fund wildfire risk reduction and forest restoration, all while creating low-carbon energy and a stable source of jobs in rural economies across the country.

Despite this potential, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has not invested in biomass heat (bioheat) and power (biopower) projects and research. This bill introduces modest steps to develop this resource, learn more about its full potential, and improve interagency coordination between DOE and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service on this topic.

This legislation will:

- Establish a collaborative working group between DOE and the USDA, called the “Bioheat and Biopower Initiative,” to promote the development of efficient, economical and environmentally sustainable approaches for using wood for heat and power.
- At DOE, create a \$30 million grant program for technologies that demonstrate innovative ways of drying and processing woody biomass to bring down transportation and logistics costs, or that demonstrate innovative ways of utilizing biomass for heat and power, such as retrofitting existing power plants to replace coal with biomass. Grant recipients are required to make a matching investment, to ensure accountability and maximize private investment.
- At the U.S. Forest Service, create a \$10 million grant program for feasibility assessments, engineering designs, and construction of commercially proven technologies that efficiently utilize biomass for heat and power. Again, this grant program would require an equal matching investment from grant recipients.
- Expand the existing and underutilized Energy Efficiency and Conservation Loan Program, run by the USDA Rural Utilities Service to include bioheat and biopower projects; and create a new low-interest loan program for bioheat and biopower projects not located in a rural utility service territory.
- Establish a research program to continue studying the environmental sustainability of heat and power from woody biomass, and the use of woody biomass for district energy systems.
- Establish a technical assistance program at DOE and USDA for communities exploring opportunities for using biomass for heat and power.