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## Dubious Energy Tradeoffs - Confronting conflicts of interest in our 'business-friendly' state

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**By David Kyler, Center for a Sustainable Coast**



GEORGIA faces an array of daunting challenges in making the transition to clean energy and reliable environmental accountability, made more problematic by conflicting business interests.

Efforts to reduce the ongoing degeneration of our natural resources and life-support systems are subverted by short-term profits that finance powerful political influences dangerously delaying or discrediting needed policy reforms.

It should surprise no-one that Georgia's standing as the nation's most 'business-friendly' state is achieved with trade-offs that strongly oppose proposals to improve the accountability of economic development.

Unfortunately, being business-friendly has been achieved by shifting both economic and environmental costs of development onto taxpayers and citizens.

## **Energy and Environmental Injustices**

The injustice of raising energy costs paid by Georgia households to make the electricity used by industry more affordable undoubtedly helped motivate voters to decisively oust two members of the Public Service Commission last November.

As members of the PSC, those losing incumbents approved a series of increases in rates and fees that produced a 34% rise in average residential power bills over recent years, while industrial power-costs remained significantly lower.

Between 2021 and 2023, residential power bills increased at nearly twice the rate paid by industrial customers. Depending on location in the state, Georgia industries pay between 22% and 30% less than households per unit of energy used. [See [Energy Information Agency report](#).]

Similar injustices were at work in the PSC’s September 2024 decision that sanctioned the combustion of wood to generate electricity. With that approval, the PSC awarded Georgia’s powerful timber industry a potentially enormous windfall – possibly worth millions in annual profits – while defiantly ignoring widely documented facts substantiating why biomass energy is dirty power.

As reported by the Center for Biological Diversity, “Biomass energy is made by burning living things like trees, crop residues, and other “woody biomass” to produce electricity.

Like fossil fuels, biomass energy releases loads of planet-heating carbon dioxide and health-harming air pollution.

Yet, the biomass industry and its enablers keep promoting it as “clean” — when it’s anything but.”

According to CBD’s scientifically confirmed analysis, biomass energy is …

- Polluting, emitting climate and air contaminants that worsens the climate crisis, harming millions with worse flooding, drought, heat-related disease, and respiratory illnesses.
- Disruptive to vast areas of clearcut landscapes, causing water pollution, diminished capacity to absorb heat-trapping CO<sub>2</sub>, and accelerating the extinction of species.
- Expensive and dependent on government subsidies that deprive lower-cost and cleaner energy alternatives like clean solar and wind power from the support they deserve.
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Contrary to claims by industry, biomass energy isn’t carbon neutral. Burning trees and other woody materials for energy increases carbon in Earth’s atmosphere for decades — accelerating the worst impacts of climate change by compounding the accumulation of heat-trapping emissions.

Moreover, proportional to power output, biomass plants are among the largest emitters of particulate matter and nitrogen oxide, in addition to releasing carcinogens and heavy metals, harming public health, especially in communities directly exposed to biomass emissions.

These risks are predominantly concentrated in communities of color and low-income residents already suffering from high pollution burdens. That means using biomass worsens intolerable environmental injustices.

Proponents of biomass also commonly assert that cutting trees will reduce wildfire emissions and protect communities from wildfires. But research has concluded that widespread forest removal produces more contamination than it prevents from wildfire emissions, thereby increasing climate pollution.

## **Hidden Costs & Consequences**

Biomass power is expensive, yet it is being supported by incentives and subsidies paid for by the public, which most taxpayers know nothing about. These subsidies include tax credits, grants, and government research. [See report by [Taxpayers for Common Sense](#).]

A bill now in the General Assembly [HB402] would extend subsidies to biomass projects by erroneously equating them with clean energy, making biomass ventures eligible for state infrastructure grants and loans. While wisely promoting legitimate clean energy [wind and solar], the bill is flawed by misconceptions about terminology and must be carefully amended before further consideration.

In the energy-technology lexicon, wood combustion – biomass – is called “renewable” because the fuel can be regrown. But due to the higher costs and serious environmental harms of biomass combustion, it’s critical that distinctions between so-called renewable energy and truly clean energy are emphasized.

As a result of dangerous – and possibly orchestrated – misinformation, worldwide biomass now comprises more than half of so-called ‘renewable energy’ sources – despite rapid growth in use of lower-cost clean power using solar and wind.

Instead of prioritizing speculative short-term profitability, our energy and development choices must be based on well-validated facts about all the consequences of available alternatives.

As long as profits are generated at the expense of environmental quality, public health, and economic justice, humanity’s future will continue to be callously vandalized.

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*David Kyler is the co-founder and director of the Center for a Sustainable Coast, a non-profit organization working to defend coastal Georgia’s environment and quality of life by raising public awareness about critical threats and opportunities related to environmental quality and development. Under Kyler’s leadership, the Center publishes more environmental commentary than any other group in Georgia. This vital work is supported by tax-deductible donations and private grants. Credit card donations can be made on the Center’s website [[www.sustainablecoast.org](http://www.sustainablecoast.org)] and checks can be mailed to the Center at 221 Mallory Street, Suite B, St. Simons Island, Georgia 31522. Readers are also encouraged to explore the Center’s website postings and the organization’s blog at [www.southatlanticbytes.blog](http://www.southatlanticbytes.blog).*