RACHEL CARSON COUNCIL

Report Fact Sheet

Drax: The Destroyer of Forests

SUMMARY

In a historic victory for advocacy groups and Californians in 2025, Drax canceled plans to build the largest proposed wood pellet operation in California. The project—propsed in a partnership between Drax and rural nonprofit Golden State Natural Resources—would have constructed two wood pellet processing facilities: one in the foothills of the Central Sierra Nevada Mountain range in Tuolumne County, and one in the Modoc Plateau of Northern California, in Lassen County. While these projects have since been blocked, it is important to examine Drax's proposal as part of a larger, ongoing strategy in which Drax seeks to capitalize on greenwashing opportunities, mislead the public on wildfire management and "sustainability," and take advantage of environmental justice communities.

REPORT FINDINGS

Drax's withdrawn proposal in California is a telling case study of their expansion strategy—and its difficulties.

The project stalled for financial reasons in addition to community opposition. An agreement between the Golden State Finance Authority and the Forest Service recognized that the costs of biomass removal exceed the returns they might receive for wood pellets. In other words, without the substantial subsidies that they anticipated, the proposed project would essentially lose money from the start.

Wildfire management remains a fraught justification for expanding the logging industry and rationalizing wood pellet production.

Intensively thinning areas "to reduce potential fire fuel" has been found to have little to no impact on which areas ultimately end up burning. Where fires actually burn is determined by other factors, including wind, drought, and warming.

Burning biomass fundamentally undermines decarbonization goals, burdens communities, and drains government subsidies.

Imported wood pellet biomass is treated as "emission-free" because the greenhouse gases released from burning wood are counted where the trees are harvested, not where they are burned. This loophole has allowed the industrial wood pellet industry to tap into renewable energy subsidies, masking its true climate impact and driving rapid expansion in the United States and Canada. The report makes clear that without these subsidies, wood pellet energy generation would be economically untenable.

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BIOMASS BY-THE-NUMBERS

- **44-104 years**: how long it takes to repay the carbon debt of a biomass harvest, even if trees are replanted.
- Biomass-burning plants emit **150% the carbon dioxide of coal** and **300-400% the CO2 of natural gas** per unit of energy produced, according to the Partnership for Policy Integrity.
- Even bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) power plants result in **780 kg of uncaptured emissions** per megawatt-hour after burning wood pellets; or **80% of the emissions of a coal plant smokestack.**

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Eliminate public funding and subsidies for biomass.** Industrial-scale woody biomass should be removed from all federal and state subsidy programs, including tax credits, development bonds, and grants. Subsidizing biomass places it in unfair competition with legitimately clean technologies like solar and wind, while completely undermining any climate benefit.
- **End the carbon neutrality myth for forest biomass.** Burning wood is not carbon neutral—even under best-case life cycle scenarios, it takes decades to centuries to recapture carbon lost through logging. Lawmakers should discuss that timeline and how it misaligns with necessary carbon mitigation timelines.
- **Reject clear-cutting as a wildfire solution.** Clear-cutting can increase fire risks by encouraging fast-growing, flammable vegetation and removing mature (and sometimes fire-resistant) trees. What Drax and others propose will only worsen ecosystem instability and fire severity. Instead, promote ecologically-sound wildfire risk reduction, such as removing “ladder fuels” (e.g. saplings, dense understory), preserving larger trees, supporting home hardening, and prioritizing community fire preparedness/adaptation.
- **Continue to address environmental injustice in biomass-exporting regions.** Industrial pellet production disproportionately harms poor, rural, often majority-Black communities. Basic controls against noise, operating hours, traffic, and fugitive dust are bare-minimum safeguards until the energy system reforms against biomass.
- **Remain vigilant toward Drax’s and GSNR’s proposals in California.** Even after abandoning their proposal and effectively starting over from scratch, GSNR now intends to “explore alternative approaches” for implementing the project. The group even voted to pursue wood chip production instead. A wood chip production proposal could yield similar community impact issues and perpetuate the wood product industry more broadly.

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