
OPINION

Tim Echols irresponsibly endorses Rayonier biomass project

It's troubling that Tim Echols, a public service commissioner now campaigning to retain his seat on the PSC, is promoting the combustion of wood to generate electricity when harmful impacts remain inadequately examined.

This is especially worrisome because the PSC approved Georgia Power's plan to buy 79 megawatts of power from the operation. The PSC approved the plan despite Georgia Power officials' acknowledgement that the cost of electricity generated using biomass is higher than other energy sources. Furthermore, the PSC's endorsement of biomass will enable Georgia Power to participate in this venture, likely to shift additional costs onto energy consumers to subsidize a project that benefits corporate profit-making.

Echols and other PSC members are obligated to defend the public interest in energy production, not serve as a spokesman for the timber industry. This transgression was made abundantly clear in a recent Press-Sentinel article about the proposed Altamaha Green Energy (AGE) biomass project.

Echols asserted that "biomass burning" by RYAM improves timber industry sustainability – but conspicuously avoided its consequences for the environment and public health, while failing to explain what he means by the term "sustainability." In other words, Mr. Echols is using his influence as a member of the PSC to promote timber-industry benefits instead of protecting the public interest.

Burning wood quickly releases massive amounts of carbon, which would require years to be recaptured by growing trees. The carbon storage (sequestration) lost by cutting trees down, combined with releasing carbon and other materials through biomass combustion, will worsen the heat-trapping effects of air pollution already rapidly overheating our climate.

The project will also endanger the health of people exposed to particulate pollutants contained in combustion emissions that are not adequately evaluated in the draft EPD permit. Burning wood releases fine particulates, nitrogen oxides (NOx), sulfur dioxide (SO₂), carbon monoxide (CO) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that worsen air quality, increasing asthma and lung disease and causing unjustified risks to public health.

In a June 2025 letter to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division about this project, Southern Environmental Law Center stated:

"The new ... boiler has more than twice the heat input capacity of the older [one]. The new boiler ... will also generate up to 70 MW of electricity for sale to the grid. Despite this large increase in heat input

capacity and new purpose, AGE claims that ... ‘there will be no resulting significant emissions increases of any regulated ... pollutant.’ However, the emissions [evaluation] ...does not include [complete] emissions reports that allow the public to compare and verify the emission reductions [being claimed].”

Moreover, leaving woody logging debris to decompose has timber management advantages that would be lost if these materials are removed for biomass burning.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Research, Education and Economic Information System, “Benefits of logging residues [remaining on the forest floor]... include protection of seedlings from exposure to heat and drought which can negatively impact survival rates Slash material can protect forest soils from erosion, protect the root systems of new seedlings, provide habitat for wildlife, and act as a slow-release source of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus into the ecosystem. Also, while harvesting-machine traffic may cause increased soil disturbance and compaction, the presence of surface organic matter helps to reduce the potential for erosion.”

There is no acknowledgement of these benefits in any of Echols’ citations.

As a member of the Public Service Commission hoping to remain in office, Echols should not be making biased claims that remain unsubstantiated by verifiable facts.

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