

# DON'T BURN TREES TO FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE—LET THEM GROW

By Bill McKibben August 15, 2019



*Countries and public utilities are trying to reduce carbon emissions by burning wood pellets instead of coal, but recent studies have shown that the practice will have disastrous effects.*

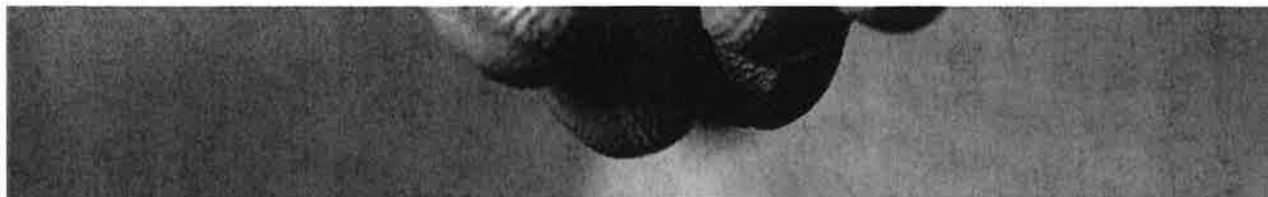
Photograph by Anna Gowthorpe / PA Wire / AP

**O**f all the solutions to climate change, ones that involve trees make people the happiest. Earlier this year, when a Swiss study announced that planting 1.2 trillion trees might cancel out a decade's worth of carbon emissions, people swooned (at least on Twitter). And last month, when Ethiopian officials announced that twenty-three million of their citizens had planted three hundred and fifty million trees in a single day, the swooning

terms, it should be a wash. In 2009, Middlebury College, where I teach, was lauded for replacing its oil-fired boilers with a small biomass plant; I remember how proud the students who first presented the idea to the board of trustees were.

William R. Moomaw, a climate and policy scientist who has published some of the most recent papers on the carbon cycle of forests, told me about the impact of biomass, saying, “back in those days, I thought it could be considered carbon neutral. But I hadn’t done the math. I hadn’t done the physics.” Once scientists did that work, they fairly quickly figured out the problem. Burning wood to generate electricity expels a big puff of carbon into the atmosphere *now*. Eventually, if the forest regrows, that carbon will be sucked back up. But *eventually* will be too long—as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made clear last fall, we’re going to break the back of the climate system in the next few decades. For all intents and purposes, in the short term, wood is just another fossil fuel, and in climate terms the short term is mostly what matters. As an **M.I.T. study** put it last year, while the regrowth of forests, if it happens, can eventually repay the carbon debt created by the burning of wood pellets, that payback time ranges from forty-four years to a hundred and four in forests in the eastern U.S., and, in the meantime, the carbon you’ve emitted can produce “potentially irreversible impacts that may arise before the long-run benefits are realized.”

As the scientific research on this carbon debt emerged, in the past decade, at least a few of us in the environmental movement started **voicing opposition** to burning trees. The most effective leadership has come from the Southeast, where community activists have pointed out that logging rates are now the highest in the world, and that rural communities—often communities of color—are being disrupted by endless lines of logging trucks and by air pollution from plants where trees are turned into easy-to-ship pellets. Earlier this year, a proposal to build the largest pellet mill in the world, in Lucedale, Mississippi, drew opposition from a coalition that included the N.A.A.C.P. and



*A person holding biomass fuel at Drax Power Station in North Yorkshire.*

Photograph by Anna Gowthorpe / PA Wire / AP

European subsidies treat power plants that burn wood as the equivalent of, say, solar panels, despite the fact that, under even the most generous scenarios, they emit at least ten times as much carbon, when factoring in the energy that it takes to make the panels. “They’re looking for ways to shift their infrastructure without drastically overhauling it,” Bob Musil, a veteran-environmentalist who now runs the Rachel Carson Council, said. “Ways that don’t cause shifts in culture.” It’s remarkably similar to what happened in the United States with fracking: political leaders, including some in the Obama Administration, decided that the least-fuss way to replace coal would be with natural gas, only to learn that, as new science emerged, they had in fact replaced carbon emissions with leaking methane, which was making the climate crisis worse.

In this case, the greenwashing is particularly misleading, because burning trees defies the carbon math in another way, too: once they have been cut down, the trees won’t be there to soak up the carbon. “The Southeast U.S. is falsely seen as a sustainable source of wood,” Danna Smith, the executive director of the Dogwood Alliance, told me, because when the trees are cut down they can regrow—unlike, say, in the Amazon, where thin soils usually mean that when trees are cut down the land becomes pasture. She added, “But these forests are vital carbon sinks.”

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“You can get to some pretty big numbers this way,” Moomaw added. “The Woods Hole Research Center found that, if we let secondary forests grow around the world, they would sequester 2.8 billion tons of carbon a year, which is about sixty per cent of the gap between what humans produce annually and what natural systems currently soak up. Instead, we’re increasingly cutting them down to burn for fuel.” Earlier this year, Moomaw helped draft **a letter** to the European Parliament which made these points, and it was signed by nearly eight hundred scientists, mostly from Europe and North America. So far, the scientists have received no reply; perhaps they should have also sent an ice bucket.

*Bill McKibben, a former New Yorker staff writer, is a founder of the grassroots climate campaign 350.org and the Schumann Distinguished Scholar in environmental studies at Middlebury College. His latest book is “**Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?**” [Read more »](#)*