

## News from the Massachusetts Medical Society

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### **Massachusetts Medical Society adopts policy opposing biomass power plants**

Waltham, Mass. – Dec. 9 – On the grounds that biomass power plants pose an unacceptable risk to the public's health by increasing air pollution, the Massachusetts Medical Society has adopted a policy opposing three currently proposed large-scale biomass power plants in Massachusetts and urging state government to adopt policies to minimize the approval and construction of new biomass plants.

The policy, proposed by the organization's Committee on Environmental and Occupational Health, was approved by the Society's House of Delegates at its interim meeting on December 4. The MMS House of Delegates, comprised of physician members from across the state, sets policy for the 22,000-member statewide physician organization.

Currently, three large-scale plants are being proposed for western Massachusetts, in Russell (Hampden County), Greenfield (Franklin County), and Springfield (Hampden County). The plants propose to burn wood from harvested trees and/or construction debris and will be situated near neighborhoods, schools, and homes.

Jefferson Dickey, M.D., an internist at the Community Health Center of Franklin County in Turners Falls and a former chair of the committee, was one of the authors of the resolution adopted as policy.

Dr. Dickey said "Air pollution is a common and noxious mixture of gasses, particles, liquids, the vast majority of which comes from power plants, industrial furnaces and high-temperature industrial processes, and transportation, such as buses, trucks, cars, and small engines.

"Epidemiologists have long recognized that air pollution is associated with an increased risk of a broad range of medical problems," Dr. Dickey continued, "from asthma attacks and decreased lung growth in children to increased lung disease exacerbations, emergency room use, hospitalization rates, heart attacks, and death rates in adults."

"Recent research and medical literature reviews provide graphic confirmation of the seriousness of the issue," he said. "The equation is simple: the more air pollution, the higher the mortality rate. Research has shown that lowering air pollution levels is associated with better health outcomes."

Current state policy considers biomass fuel renewable, because trees consumed as fuel are assumed to re-grow, and biomass electricity generation is eligible for financial incentives under the state's Green Communities Act, which mandates that an increasing proportion of the state's power be generated from renewable sources.

The policy adopted by the Medical Society's contained four points:

- urging state government to adopt policies to minimize the approval and construction of new biomass plants, and instead promote energy efficiency and conservation and zero-pollutant emissions renewable energy technologies;

- opposing the three currently proposed large-scale biomass power plants in Massachusetts on the grounds that each facility poses an unacceptable public health risk;
- urging state and federal government through appropriate channels to remove large-scale biomass electricity generation plants from the list of technologies eligible to receive renewable energy credits, federal stimulus funds, and Massachusetts Technology Collaborative loans, and thereby remove these incentives for their existence; and
- urging state government to extend Department of Environmental Protection regulatory authority to small-scale biomass facilities to ensure that the most protective air pollution emissions controls are utilized.

The Massachusetts Medical Society, with more than 20,000 physicians and student members, is dedicated to educating and advocating for the patients and physicians of Massachusetts. The Society publishes the New England Journal of Medicine, a leading global medical journal and web site, and Journal Watch alerts and newsletters covering 13 specialties. The Society is also a leader in continuing medical education for health care professionals throughout Massachusetts, conducting a variety of medical education programs for physicians and health care professionals. Founded in 1781, MMS is the oldest continuously operating medical society in the country. For more information, visit [www.massmed.org](http://www.massmed.org), [www.nejm.org](http://www.nejm.org), or [www.jwatch.org](http://www.jwatch.org).

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