Dear Mr. Rosenthal:

While it is certainly the prerogative of The New York Times editorial board to editorialize for or against any piece of legislation it wishes, you also owe a duty to your readers to present the issues soberly, with due respect for basic journalistic standards of accuracy, objectivity, and balance.

Your recent editorial against aspects of the energy bill (“An Energy Bill in Need of Fixes” April 20, 2016), particularly the provision that recognizes the carbon benefits of forest bioenergy or biomass, fails that duty in a number of respects.

You describe the provision in question—crafted under the leadership of Sens. Susan Collins (R., Maine) and Amy Klobuchar (D., Minnesota), and enjoying the support of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents in the Senate—as the bill’s “most problematic.”

The editorial goes on:

“The underlying assumption is that the carbon emissions caused by power plants that burn wood are canceled out by the carbon absorbed by new and growing trees. But this is a dangerous misconception. Burning wood releases carbon almost instantly, whereas it will take years, if not decades, for new trees to absorb an equivalent amount of carbon, as 65 scientists and environmentalists pointed out in a letter to senators in February.”

This may be the view of the signatories of the letter—a group that, as you note, includes scientists (only some of them forest experts) as well as political activists—but it does not reflect the state of the scientific debate.
When these activists talk about the science on carbon neutrality and biomass, they inevitably quote themselves—a small handful of studies commissioned, designed, authored, funded, and pitched to editorial boards by the same few groups with the same political agendas and the same predetermined views. But when you look at the peer-reviewed literature in leading publications in the field like The Journal of Forestry, and independent experts like the 100+ top university scientists at the National Association of University Forest Resource Programs (NAUFRP), you get a much different story.

Like the activists you cite, your editorial implies that biomass is worse than fossil fuels at the moment of combustion. But had you consulted NAUFRP’s own analysis, signed by scholars from 80+ top research universities, you might have learned that focus is misplaced: “Forest biomass energy yields significant net decreases in overall carbon accumulation in the atmosphere over time compared to fossil fuels,” NAUFRP scientists conclude. “Comparisons between forest biomass emissions and fossil fuel emissions at the time of combustions and for short periods thereafter do not account for long-term carbon accumulation in the atmosphere and can significantly distort or ignore comparative carbon impacts over time.”

Or had you sought out the wide-ranging review of the state of the field in the Journal of Forestry, you would have read that “in the case of forest-derived fuels, as long as wood-producing land remains in forest, this short-term increase in emissions is reversed in essentially all cases, and in the long-term, the use of forest-based systems provides lower cumulative CO2 emissions than fossil fuel-based alternatives.” (Miner et. al, 2009)

You similarly repeat the activist talking point that it takes “years” or even “decades” for biomass to reach carbon balance. But this ignores the scientific consensus on the appropriate timescales for measurement of the climate impacts of various fuel sources. NAUFRP scholars argue a 100-year measurement timeframe is necessary because it “provides a more accurate accounting … [and] more appropriately demonstrates the cumulative carbon benefits of biomass energy compared to fossil fuels.” The literature review in the Journal of Forestry puts it even more starkly: “Using a time horizon of less than 100 years to judge the significance of emissions of biogenic CO2 implies that wood energy emissions are more damaging than fossil fuel-derived CO2 and other GHGs, which has no scientific basis.” (Emphasis added.)

The “decades” fallacy also runs counter to standard forestry practice, not to mention common sense, in that it implies the production of biomass energy involves massive “clear-cutting” followed by decades of waiting around. The U.S. forestland base does not wait around. Not only are harvested trees replanted—at an approximate two-to-one ratio—but those trees that are not harvested, or do not die from old age, disease, fire, or catastrophic windstorms are constantly growing and adding to the standing forest biomass volume. There is no need to wait decades to bank that regrowth.

The Times editorial board could have learned all of this by reaching out to any of our four member organizations, which are respectively the leading associations at every level of
the forest value chain. Or you could have reached out to the independent experts themselves, instead of limiting your consultation to activist groups. Indeed, NAUFRP sent its own letters—with 100+ signatories, all of them forest scientists—to the Science Advisory Board of the EPA making just these points.

We don’t expect the Times board, or any member of the press, to take our “side” on the issues, but we do expect them to present all the relevant facts to their readers, without bias or omission. We trust informed readers to make the right call for themselves. But that process can’t work if you’re placing a thumb on the scale, either willfully or through lack of diligence.

We look forward to hearing how you intend to remedy these flaws.

Thank you,

Robert Glowinski  
President and CEO, American Wood Council

Donna Harman  
President and CEO, American Forest & Paper Association

Deb Hawkinson  
President, Forest Resources Association

David P. Tenny  
President and CEO, National Alliance of Forest Owners.

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*Biomass101 is a consortium of organizations whose members represent every facet of the forest products industry: from owners of forests both large and small, to wood suppliers, to major manufacturers of wood, pulp, and paper goods you use every day.*