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Opinion: EPA's Pruitt helping set the world right again

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By Tim Echols

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EPA head Scott Pruitt recently made a surprise trip to an elementary school in remote middle Georgia, and his pronouncement could have a profound impact on the energy portfolios of the future. Here's how.

By declaring biomass carbon-neutral, Administrator Pruitt returns the agency to its pre-2010 position and brings the United States in line with the European Union and California. After all, U.S. forests absorb CO₂, and figures in 2015 suggest that over 11 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions were "sunk" in our collective forests.

More importantly for heavily wooded states, Pruitt's pronouncement that burning wood would be "carbon-neutral" instantly made wood chips equivalent to wind and solar.

Since I help regulate energy in a state with virtually no wind and 25 million acres of pine trees, it could change our future.

That future is one shaped by a post-Trump White House Democrat like Bernie Sanders who might take their own EPA down a cap-and-trade road where emitting CO₂ carries with it a financial penalty. President Obama tried this and was shot down with Congress rejecting the infamous government, market-based approach to controlling CO₂ emissions by providing economic incentives for reductions.

To be precise, Pruitt said that, going forward, biomass from managed forests (pine plantations in Georgia's case) will be treated as carbon-neutral when used for energy production at stationary sources. He added that the EPA would be assessing options for incorporating non-forest biomass (think yard waste) as carbon-neutral as well.

Solar and wind are wonderful, but they are intermittent. Burning wood chips or pellets, as they do in Europe, becomes renewable baseload energy: reliable, dispatchable and sustainable.

Utilizing biomass also offers a hedge against rising electric rates that might result from future escalation in natural gas, coal and uranium prices — all commodities that have historical price fluctuation. Even solar panels have experienced a price increase with the recent tariff imposed by the Administration.

Using a resource like biomass provides clean-tech job opportunities for local economies for plant operators, truck drivers and logging crews. And because those semi-trucks loaded with chips arrive around the clock, biomass provides a steady supply of electricity and steam and it does not depend on the sun shining or the wind blowing.

Administrator Pruitt has made a few mistakes as he has moved from serving at state level to the federal level. It is a steep learning curve and patience is in order. But know this: he is federalizing and reforming an agency that has been heavy-handed, anti-state, and anti-growth. I, for one, am willing to cut him some slack.

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