

# Biomass

## What Is Biomass?

**Biomass** is any **organic** matter that can be used as an energy source. Wood, crops, and yard and animal waste are examples of biomass. People have used biomass longer than any other energy source. For thousands of years, people have burned wood to heat their homes and cook their food.

Biomass gets its energy from the sun. Plants absorb sunlight in a process called **photosynthesis**. With sunlight, air, water, and nutrients from the soil, plants make sugars called **carbohydrates**. Foods that are rich in carbohydrates (like spaghetti) are good sources of energy for the human body. Biomass is called a **renewable** energy source because we can grow more in a short period of time.

## Use of Biomass

Until the mid-1800s, wood gave Americans 90 percent of the energy they used. Today, biomass provides us about five percent of the energy we use. It has been replaced by coal, natural gas, petroleum, and other energy sources.

There are many sources of biomass used in the U.S. today. Two sources, wood and **biofuels**, make up the majority of consumption. Other biomass sources include crops, garbage, landfill gas, and byproducts from agriculture.

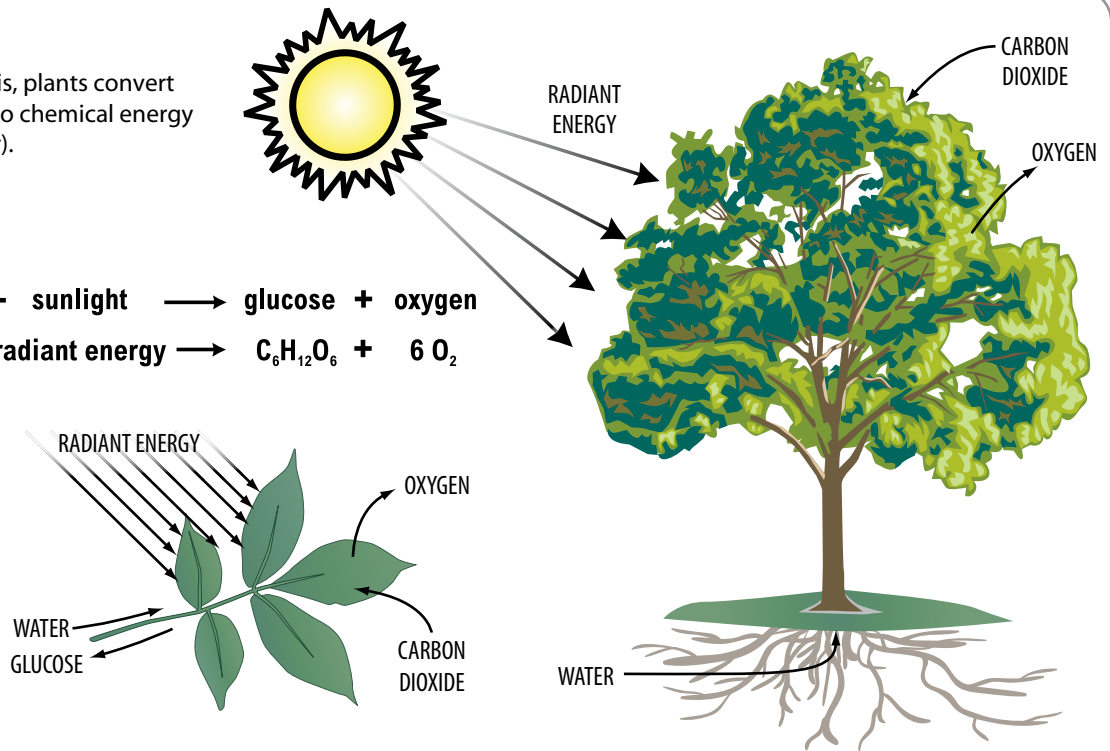
Industry is the biggest biomass consumer today; it uses nearly half of biomass to make products. The transportation sector uses 31 percent of biomass by consuming **ethanol** and other fuels, like biodiesel or aviation biofuel. Power companies use biomass to produce electricity. Ten percent of biomass is used to generate electricity today.

Homes and businesses are the third biggest users; about one in ten homes burns wood in fireplaces and stoves for additional heat. Less than three percent use wood as their main heating fuel. Most use a source other than wood for heating.

In the future, plants may be grown to fuel power plants. Farmers may also have huge farms of energy crops to produce ethanol and other biofuels for transportation.

## Photosynthesis

In the process of photosynthesis, plants convert radiant energy from the sun into chemical energy in the form of glucose (or sugar).



## Using Biomass Energy

A log does not give off energy unless you do something to it. Usually, wood is burned to make heat. Burning is not the only way to use biomass energy, though. There are four ways to release the energy stored in biomass: burning, bacterial decay, **fermentation**, and conversion to gas/liquid fuel.

### ▪ Burning

Wood was the biggest energy provider in the United States and the rest of the world until the mid-1800s. Wood heated homes and fueled factories. Today, wood supplies only a little of our country's energy needs. Wood is not the only biomass that can be burned. Wood shavings, fruit pits, manure, and corn cobs can all be burned for energy.

Garbage is another source of biomass. Garbage can be burned to generate steam and electricity. Power plants that burn garbage and other waste for energy are called **waste-to-energy plants**. These plants are a lot like coal-fired plants. The difference is the fuel. Garbage doesn't contain as much heat energy as coal. It takes about 900 kilograms (2,000 pounds) of garbage to equal the heat energy in 225 kilograms (500 pounds) of coal.

Sometimes, fast-growing crops like sugar cane are grown especially for their energy value. Scientists are also researching ways to grow aquatic plants like seaweed and algae for their energy value.

### ▪ Bacterial Decay

Bacteria feed on dead plants and animals. As the plants and animals decay, they produce a colorless, odorless gas called **methane**. Methane gas is rich in energy. Methane is the main ingredient in natural gas, the gas we use in our furnaces and stoves. Methane is a good energy source. We can burn it to produce heat or to generate electricity.

In some landfills, wells are drilled into the piles of garbage to capture methane produced from the decaying waste. The methane can be purified and used as an energy source, just like natural gas.

### ▪ Fermentation

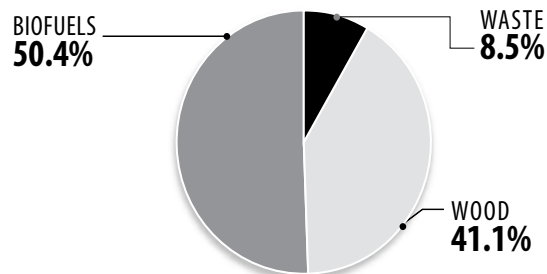
We can add yeast (a fungus) to biomass to produce an alcohol called ethanol. For centuries, people have fermented crops to make alcoholic drinks like beer and wine. Wine is fermented from grapes. Wheat, corn, grasses, and many other crops can be used to make ethanol.

Ethanol is sometimes made from corn to produce a motor fuel. Automobile pioneer Henry Ford wanted to use ethanol to power his cars instead of gasoline. Ethanol is more expensive to use than gasoline. Usually, it is mixed with gasoline to produce a fuel called E-10, which is 90 percent gasoline and 10 percent ethanol. For cars to run on a higher percentage of ethanol, their engines would have to be changed. But cars can run on E-10 without changes. Adding ethanol to gasoline lowers carbon dioxide emissions.

### ▪ Conversion

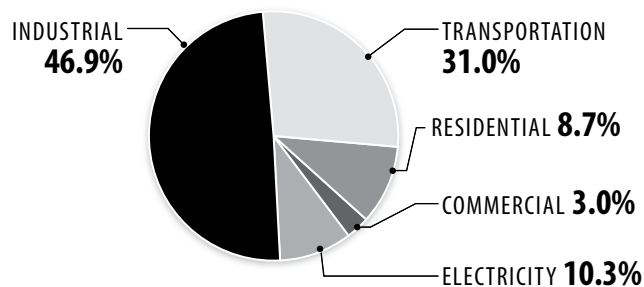
**Conversion** means changing a material into something else. Today, we can convert biomass into gas and liquid fuels. We do this by adding heat or chemicals to the biomass. The gas and liquid fuels can then be burned to produce heat or electricity, or it can be used as a fuel for automobiles. In India, cow manure is converted to methane gas to provide heat and light.

## U.S. Sources of Biomass, 2022



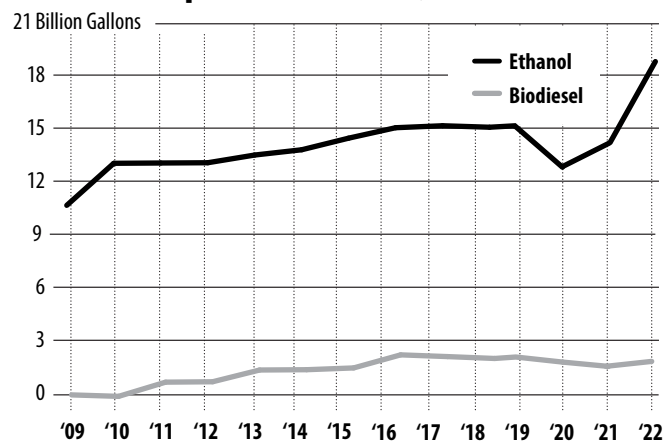
Data: Energy Information Administration  
\*Total may not equal 100% due to independent rounding.

## U.S. Biomass Consumption by Sector, 2022



Data: Energy Information Administration  
\*Total may not equal 100% due to independent rounding.

## U.S. Consumption of Biofuels, 2022



Data: Energy Information Administration

## Biomass and the Environment

Biomass can pollute the air when it is burned, though not as much as fossil fuels. Burning biomass fuels does not produce pollutants like sulfur, which can cause **acid rain**. However, burning biomass does release carbon dioxide.

Growing plants for biomass fuel may help to reduce greenhouse gases, since plants use carbon dioxide and produce oxygen as they grow. Carbon dioxide is considered an important **greenhouse gas**.