February, 2011

Dear Majority Leader Reid,

On behalf of our members and activists we urge the Senate not to take up a so-called “clean energy standard” such as that proposed in the President’s State of the Union Address that includes dirty technologies such as nuclear reactors, coal, natural gas and biomass.

A standard that includes nuclear reactors, coal, natural gas or biomass is really a “dirty energy standard” and will jeopardize our ability to achieve the long term greenhouse gas emissions needed to avoid the worst effects on our climate and our terrestrial and marine sources of food. Since toxic power facilities are disproportionately located in low income communities and communities of color, legislation that mandates or incentivizes dirty energy will exacerbate health problems in these communities across the United States. A dirty energy standard will destroy our environment, imperil public health and exacerbate our climate crisis.

Some of the dirty energy sources that have no place in any “clean energy standard” include:

**Nuclear Reactors:** Nuclear energy is not clean and it is not a viable solution to climate change. Nuclear reactors and nuclear fuel cycle facilities emit toxic radiation into our air and water on a routine basis at every stage of the process. By poisoning our air and water, nuclear energy endangers public health and the lives and wellbeing of future generations. After more than 60 years of searching we still have not found a viable solution for dealing with radioactive nuclear waste and most of it is sitting in pools at reactor sites across the country. Any long term disposition will require high level radioactive waste to be shipped across the country, creating immense risk of accidents and incidents all the while moving and not “solving” the waste problem. Despite billions in government subsidies at every stage of the fuel cycle, nuclear reactors remain too expensive to compete with cheaper and cleaner renewable alternatives on the open market, and thus new reactors remain dependent on government financing for any chance of completion. Taken together with the safety and proliferation risks implicit to nuclear power, nuclear reactors are clearly a failed technology of the past and not the clean, renewable energy source we need in the future.

**Coal:** Despite the claims of the coal industry, there is no such thing as “clean coal.” Mining coal poisons local communities’ air, pollutes local water ways, and destroys natural ecosystems. Over 2,000 miles of streams and headwaters that provide drinking water for millions of Americans have been permanently buried and destroyed by mountain top removal to get coal. Burning coal for electricity produces over 1/3 of the greenhouse gas pollution in the United States and releases harmful toxic pollution into our air and water. The over 50 toxic air pollutants such as nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and particulate matter, that result from burning coal are primary causes of health impacts including lung disease, cancer and asthma. The second largest waste stream in the United States is coal ash, a dangerous byproduct of burning coal that is currently polluting over 600 sites across the country. Currently we produce 131 million additional tons of coal ash each year. Expensive technologies that are supposed to capture and sequester global warming emissions from coal
are unproven and they cannot guarantee that these gases actually stay in the ground over the long term. Even if capture and sequester of carbon is successful it will do nothing to reduce the other environmental and public health impacts that result from mining and burning coal or the waste that results.

**Natural Gas**: Natural gas may burn “cleaner” than coal on the short term, but it is still a significant source of global warming emissions that also releases harmful air pollutants. Natural gas should not be supported with government mandates. In the long term, just like coal, natural gas is unsustainable and damaging to the climate and the environment. Burning natural gas results in the release of harmful air pollutants including particulate matter, nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide. Extracting natural gas can be extremely damaging to the environment and local communities, particularly when methods such as hydraulic fracturing are used. Hydraulic fracturing requires vast quantities of water, releases dangerous chemicals into the soil as part the process and can lead to water contamination and pollution. Additionally, wells that are hydraulically fractured are exempted from the Safe Drinking Water Act, putting millions of people’s drinking water at risk. Meeting our energy needs with natural gas in the long term will require increasingly harmful extraction processes, as it has with oil exploration, and inevitably it will require the importation of foreign sourced gas—which will require consumption of fossil fuels for transport and will keep the United States at risk of foreign pressure and manipulation for its energy needs. Finally, natural gas is a mature technology that is able to compete on its own and should not be supported with a government mandate.

**Biomass**: Combusting materials to make electricity is inherently polluting, and burning biomass is no exception. Burning biomass (including wood, grasses, garbage, manure, and other materials) for electricity causes significant air pollution, including particulate matter, volatile organic compounds, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides, and lead. Emissions of some of these pollutants from biomass can be even higher than from coal combustion and are harmful to local populations because they can cause respiratory impairment, cancer and other health impacts. Science shows that burning biomass can emit almost 1.5 times as much global warming pollution per unit of energy as coal. Converting land from natural forests to monoculture tree plantations for bioenergy production greatly reduces the carbon sequestering capacity found in natural and undisturbed forests. Additional global warming pollution is associated with the harvest and transport of biomass. In spite of these concerns, EPA has recently agreed to exempt all biomass facilities from regulation for greenhouse gas emissions pending a three year study of the global warming impacts of burning biomass. Energy mandates and incentives that include biomass and do not include protections for natural ecosystems from biomass harvesting could result in widespread forest destruction and soil degradation. Clean energy does not come out of a smokestack: biomass burning for electricity is dirty energy.

We urge you not to bring any legislation that includes a dirty energy standard to the floor. Dirty and dangerous technologies such as nuclear reactors, coal, natural gas or biomass should not be supported with a government mandate.

Sincerely,
Friends of the Earth