

Biomass, wildfire and climate change: Protesting like it's 1989

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD
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New research suggests that catastrophic wildfires, such as the Biscuit fire, have a larger than previously believed impact on climate change.

The timber industry can be part of a renewable energy future, but only if its opponents see the real threats to public forests

If you're into nostalgia, you should tune in to the debate in Eugene over the Seneca Sawmill Co.'s proposed wood-burning cogeneration plant. It will take you back 20 years, before climate change, before 7 million acres of the West burned every year, back to the days when Big Timber still roamed the Northwest.

You'd never know, listening to the critics assail the idea of producing 18.8-megawatt-hours of electricity from wood waste, that Oregon and the rest of the nation are desperately scrambling to find renewable sources of energy. And hearing Seneca officials forced to pledge, in effect, that they won't burn brush from public lands, you'd never know that hundreds of thousands of acres of those forests are overrun by brush and skinny trees.

This isn't just a matter of a few die-hard environmentalists in Eugene demanding that the Eugene Water & Electric Board refuse to buy the electricity that Seneca is planning to produce -- at two-thirds the cost of wind power, by the way, and less than a quarter of the cost of solar. This same debate is happening in the halls of Congress, where environmental groups are trying to write restrictions into the energy bill to exclude renewable energy produced from biomass taken from public lands.

The term of derision now is "greenwashing," and the cynical claim is that Seneca and the handful of other Oregon timber companies still in business are only interested in biomass and renewable energy because they see it as a key to get back to clear-cutting public lands.

Seneca plans to generate electricity by burning sawdust and other wastes from its mills, along with slash from the company's timberlands. But what exactly would be so threatening, so wrong, about a timber company like Seneca converting some of the brush on public lands into renewable energy? Which is the greater threat to Northwest forests, and to global climate: Thinning by the diminished Northwest timber industry or the next Biscuit fire?

A new paper in the April 24 issue of the journal *Science* argues that scientists have underestimated the impact that deforestation brought on by wildfires has on climate

change. "It's very clear that fire is a primary catalyst of global climate change," co-author Thomas Swetnam said. "Fires are obviously one of the major responses to climate change, but fires are not only a response. They feed back to warming, which feeds more fires. ...The scary bit is that, because of the feedbacks and other uncertainties, we could be way underestimating the role of fire in driving future climate change."

There's this persistent argument in the Northwest that wildfire is natural, and by extension, more or less a fact of life, and in any event, better than the alternatives, including thinning and brush removal. According to an analysis of almost 1,200 Western fires from 1970 to 2003, however, wildfires have ballooned in size and intensity. From 1986 onward, the researchers reported in 2006 to the journal *Science*, "wildfire frequency was nearly four times the average of 1970 to 1986, and the total area burned by these fires was more than six and a half times its previous level."

There are still a lot of people who don't seem especially bothered by these massive, stand-replacing fires. However, beyond the damage to the landscape that will last for generations -- have you driven over the Santiam Pass lately? -- there's also the matter of losing large-scale forests that are vital to the sequestration of carbon and the slowing of global warming.

This newspaper supported the Clinton forest plan, the roadless initiative, new wilderness areas and many other restrictions that reduced public lands logging. But all these years later, climate change and catastrophic fire, not commercial logging, have emerged as the greatest threats to the region's precious forests. The facts on the ground have changed. The public debate must, too.