

Power lurks in Oregon forests

by Matt Preusch,
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Photos by Matt Preusch – The Oregonian

Oregonian Biomass in the form of wood chips is piled high at the D.R. Johnson Company timber operation in Prairie City. It will be fed into a 25-year-old furnace system once used to power the mill and kiln-dry sawn lumber. Now the mill is closed, but the company generates electricity to sell to an Idaho utility. D.R. Johnson is one of several Oregon companies looking to national forests for wood debris to burn.

Tucked into a sprawling, 1,200-page climate change bill before Congress today is a tiny paragraph that touches the federal forests covering a quarter of Oregon.

It says these lands, that already give us trails to hike and clean water to drink, can provide renewable power for our toasters while helping to replace long-gone lumbering jobs.

"We fought very vigorously to get this in," said Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash., of the provision on energy from biomass -- those branches and small trees that loggers once left behind. "It's essential to help save thousands of jobs in our area."

To understand why, consider the D.R. Johnson Lumber Co. operation in Prairie City, on U.S. 26 just east of John Day. Next month, workers will stoke the boilers at a wood-fired power plant next to the company's lumber mill below eastern Oregon's Strawberry Mountains and send power over the grid to an Idaho utility.



Jim Munyon is plant manager at the D.R. Johnson Company's 10-megawatt biomass-fueled generating plant in Prairie City.

For decades, the company ran double shifts at this stud mill and at another in nearby John Day. But today both mills are idle, so instead of shipping two-by-fours out of Grant County, D.R. Johnson will sell kilowatts.

If Congress approves this bill, utilities across the country would be required to buy renewable energy, and D.R. Johnson's would qualify.

It's conceivable the housing market could rebound and restart D.R. Johnson's mills, "but for now we're a power company," said Randy Crocket, the Riddle-based company's chief financial officer.

Either way, the raw material for both products is the same: Wood from the national forest that bounds Prairie City on three sides. There are more than a dozen other similar plants in Oregon, from Tillamook to Lakeview, that depend to a greater or lesser degree on brush and wood from federal land to keep their turbines spinning.

Biomass can mean any organic material used for fuel or electricity, like switchgrass for ethanol. Oregon has forest biomass and lots of folks would like to turn a profit selling power made from it.

New Saudi Arabia

"Oregon is and should be the Saudi Arabia of biomass," said Ray Wilkeson, spokesman for the Oregon Forest Industries Council. "That's our niche in the world of renewable energy, because we've got it in spades."

Forestry officials estimate the state has enough acres of forests in need of thinning to keep about a dozen plants the size of D.R. Johnson's running around the clock for 20 years.

Rough & Ready Lumber Co. in Cave Junction, Freres Lumber Co. in Lyons and Warm Springs Forest Products also have biomass plants firing up.

Many see burning biomass as a triple win: it helps pay for forest thinning to diminish the chance of large fires in overgrown forests, creates jobs in the woods and at power facilities in rural areas, and adds another source of energy to replace dirtier coal.

"It's the right thing to do for forest management and for jobs and investment," said Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., who has verbally sparred over forest biomass with Al Gore, who is wary of using forest products for energy production.

Many environmental groups cite concern and in some cases, opposition.

They have mobilized to block efforts by Walden and Baird as well as Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Ore., to get biomass from federal forests included in the House bill, called the American Climate and Energy Security Act.

Commonly called slash, biomass is usually piled and burned at a logging site. In recent decades companies like D.R. Johnson started using waste wood to power their mills and to heat the kilns that dry cut lumber. Sometimes they would sell the excess power.

Thinning projects

But mills are closing, and the number of trees being cut on public lands is a small fraction of what it once was in the Northwest. So the most likely source for the material now is the expensive and extensive thinning projects on federal forests to clear brush and small trees from dense stands of timber in the hope of reducing the risk of large fires.

This thinning work is expensive for the U.S. Forest Service, so selling the byproduct to power generators is seen as a way for the agency to defray its costs.

But it takes a lot of diesel trucks to haul that wood from forest to burner. And even with subsidies, power created by woody biomass costs more per kilowatt

than wind unless it's a side operation to a running mill, according to the Oregon Forest Resources Institute.

Environmental groups worry the biomass power industry could develop such an appetite for wood it could lead to unsustainable harvests on federal forests, sending them into sensitive areas for material for their burners.

"If it was very carefully used and selectively used it could be effective, but, boy, the enthusiasm is off the charts," said Doug Heiken, forestry director for the group Oregon Wild.

Forest biomass is eligible for the federal production tax credit and is included as part of Oregon's renewable energy mandate, though only plants built before 1995 meet the state threshold for "renewable."

But including biomass in the nationwide bill could motivate utilities, required by federal law to get an increasing proportion of the energy they sell from renewable sources, to buy power from plants like D.R. Johnson's.

"If biomass-produced energy is considered renewable, there is more demand for that kind of power, and the rates you can get for selling that power would have upward pressure on them," said D.R. Johnson's Crocket.

The bill being debated today defines federal forest biomass as renewable unless it comes from protected places like national parks, wilderness areas or old growth stands. That's slightly less restrictive than an earlier version that also restricted wood from "mature stands" and a big change from the original version that excluded all federal forest biomass.

"It started so bad, the only thing we were doing is making it less bad," Baird said.

Even if the House approves the bill today, the debate isn't over. The Senate still has to take up the legislation.

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