

Plugging into Seneca

EWEB a logical customer for plant's electricity

EDITORIAL

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One of the several benefits of Seneca Sawmill Co.'s proposed wood-burning cogeneration plant is that it would produce power in an area that now imports most of its electricity. That benefit would be lost if, as some advocated at a meeting Tuesday, the Eugene Water & Electric Board declined the opportunity to sign an agreement to purchase the plant's power. Seneca would surely find eager customers elsewhere, and EWEB would continue its reliance on electricity from distant sources.

The utility board, however, did the sensible thing, voting 4-1 to give EWEB General Manager Randy Berggren the green light to negotiate a power purchase contract.

It's a good deal for EWEB: The Seneca plant will produce 18.8 megawatts of electricity, twice as much as is generated by EWEB's Walterville hydroelectric plant on the McKenzie River. Biomass-fueled cogeneration is defined as a renewable energy source, which means that power from the Seneca plant would help EWEB meet the state requirement that large utilities obtain 25 percent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2025.

The price is also attractive. According to EWEB figures, a megawatt of electricity from solar panels costs \$391, while the same amount of power from wind turbines costs \$143. Power from the Seneca plant is expected to cost \$87 per megawatt hour. If the utility board had passed up the Seneca contract, EWEB customers would eventually have seen the result in their utility bills.

Price is not the only advantage that makes the Seneca plant an appealing addition of EWEB's renewable energy portfolio. The wood-fueled plant will be able to generate electricity around the clock, producing firm power on demand. That will make it a valuable complement to the significant amounts of intermittent wind power that EWEB already generates or buys.

EWEB's contract with Seneca, and the plant itself, is opposed by people who believe it will be a substantial new source of air pollution in west Eugene. The utility is not the agency to evaluate those concerns. Air quality issues are being weighed by the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency, which will not grant a permit to the plant unless it meets emissions standards.

Seneca claims its plant will exceed air quality standards. The company also expects that a quarter of the plant's fuel will come from forest slash. LRAPA won't consider that offset, but the fact that large amounts of wood waste will be burned in boilers equipped

with pollution controls rather than in open fires should have a positive effect on air quality.

Others see wood-fueled biomass as a threat to forest health — a new justification for logging clad in the green rhetoric of renewable energy. Seneca, however, expects to obtain fuel for its plant from its own forest lands, which are being managed for timber production already. And three-quarters of the wood chips and sawdust that will fire the plant's boilers will be the byproducts of current sawmill operations. The question of where biomass energy plants will obtain their fuel has been answered in Seneca's case: The company has most of the fuel it needs on hand.

If EWEB had passed up the Seneca contract, another utility seeking low-cost renewable energy would have seized the opportunity. The kilowatts from Seneca's plant would have flowed out of Eugene, while the same number of kilowatts would have flowed the opposite direction from distant generating sources, almost certainly including turbines fired by natural gas.

Instead, EWEB opted to use locally generated renewable energy at home. EWEB customers should hope that contract negotiations proceed smoothly. It's a good deal all around.

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