

GUEST VIEWPOINT

No shortage of forest slash for biomass fuel projects

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Forest biomass represents abundant renewable energy potential for Oregon, and the proposed Seneca Sustainable Energy project is sized appropriately to address that company's excess woody biomass from its timber harvesting practices and its sawmill.

Oregon has 30 million acres of public and private forest land. These lands are among the most productive in the world for forest growth. However, for almost 100 years, it has been public policy to suppress forest fire, a natural part of forest ecology. Today, Oregonians are beginning to understand that this has resulted in a landscape of densely stocked forestlands choked with excess woody biomass. In the southern and eastern portions of the state, especially, this has created fire control issues that should not be ignored.

In 2005 the Oregon Legislature approved Senate Bill 1072, creating the Oregon Forest Biomass Working Group. The working group includes representatives from the energy industry, the Legislature, conservation groups, state agencies, federal agencies, the forest industry and entrepreneurs.

Among its most important functions has been to determine where the state's energy policy for renewable resources could be enhanced to promote thinning of overstocked forest lands and the use of slash from harvest operations to fuel biomass energy generation projects.

In SB 1072 the Legislature defined woody biomass. During the same session, lawmakers established a renewable portfolio standard and a renewable fuels standard, both of which include woody biomass as a renewable energy feedstock. Legislation requires Oregon's largest utilities to acquire 25 percent of their electricity from new, homegrown renewable sources by 2025.

The biomass group submitted its report to the governor's Renewable Energy Working Group. Among other things, the report concludes that using woody biomass to produce renewable energy should be supported at the state and federal levels.

The working group also reviewed and backed the recommendations of a 2006 report by the Oregon Forest Resources Institute, which concluded that using woody biomass for combined heat and power is the best possible use of woody biomass for energy in the near term.

The report encourages the use of woody biomass to produce steam to do two jobs at the same time — generate electricity and dry lumber. This promotes energy efficiency. The owners of the Seneca Sawmill in Eugene have proposed the Seneca Sustainable Energy project — a combined heat and power woody biomass development — next to their mill.

One concern raised regarding biomass-fired energy facilities is that there will not be enough available fuel supply from sawmill residuals alone, and the owner's harvesting practices will need to be changed in order to meet the facility's fuel needs.

Information summarized in the OFRI report indicates that an 18.8-megawatt generating plant, such as Seneca proposes, would burn approximately 132,000 bone-dry tons of woody biomass annually. The OFRI report goes on to identify forest restoration thinning, juniper rangeland restoration and logging residuals as prime sources of woody biomass in Oregon, in addition to mill residuals that have long been used by industry.

Studies summarized in the OFRI report estimate that about 1.8 million bone-dry tons of residual biomass from harvest activities is produced in Oregon annually, about 85 percent of which is on private timberlands. While we acknowledge people may have concerns about siting biomass energy plants, the growth of biomass in Lane and Douglas counties is so great that concerns about supply are not well founded.

The working group also reviewed and responded to a report submitted by the state forester to the governor and the Legislature in December 2008. One of the report's conclusions is that use of woody biomass as power plant fuel, instead of disposal in burn piles, reduces the smoke and particulate emissions associated with its disposal in the forest and reduces the volumes of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons released to the atmosphere.

The Forest Biomass Working Group does not support or oppose individual projects, and it is not our intent to do so here. However, we do believe that sustainably harvested woody biomass can play a role in addressing Oregon's needs to generate renewable energy while it provides social, ecological and economic benefits to the citizens of the state.

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