

KITTY PIERCY:

Seneca deserves a chance to prove its biomass utilization works

Project raises tough questions, but proposal looks sustainable

BY KITTY PIERCY – Mayor, City of Eugene
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The state of Oregon and the Obama administration both support biomass utilization to reduce carbon emissions and our dependence on fossil fuels. Seneca Sawmill Co. is proposing a biomass cogeneration facility that will use residue from timber manufacturing and slash from logging operations, which would otherwise be burned in open air, to produce energy for the company and the broader community.

Nothing is without controversy, especially the environmental effects of energy production — whether it is solar, wind, geothermal or biomass. Toxins are created in manufacturing, human and wildlife populations are affected, and other effects require monitoring and mitigation.

There are legitimate questions about the potential effects of biomass utilization on forest protection, air quality and issues of environmental justice. Seneca itself has generated controversies in the past due to some forest practices and political positions.

I am committed to sustainability, and have asked Eugene area businesses to step forward. At the same time I want to responsibly understand the impacts of all the steps we take.

I asked for answers about the Seneca proposal from experts in forest protection and management, state environmental quality and energy oversight, sociology, sustainability, utilities, air quality protection, toxics, and environmental justice. I also talked to neighbors of the proposed facility.

Here are the answers I received. I don't claim these answers address all concerns, but they've helped me reach my own conclusions.

Will biomass production slow down the usage of other clean forms of energy such as wind, solar and geothermal?

The demand for clean renewable energy is huge and growing. Our best response is conservation and efficiency, but we also need the full portfolio of renewable energy supplies. Governments offer tax credits to encourage this development, with biomass getting about half the tax credits of the other forms.

Won't Seneca need to cut trees or scrape the forest floor to meet the fuel demands of its cogeneration facility?

Seneca intends to use its own forest products, and has the capacity to run its cogeneration facility with its own timber residue and slash now and into the future. Over-harvesting is not economical. Seneca depends on a sustained, mature forest yield for manufacturing. Seneca complies with the state Forest Practices Act by leaving downed woody debris and wildlife trees to support future forest development.

Is Seneca's project like other biomass facilities in the state?

Seneca will be the first to use the state-of-the-art selective non-catalytic reduction system to control emissions to an extremely low level. The facility will be totally enclosed and the fuel will be stored inside, which is also not typical. All conveyors and trucks will unload inside the facility.

What effect will the cogeneration plant have on air quality?

Seneca will reduce carbon emissions by eliminating the approximately 8,500 annual truck trips carrying waste products off its manufacturing site, as well as by reducing slash burning in the forests. Modeling of the particulate and emissions controls proposed for this facility shows that emissions will be far below the threshold requirements.

There are concerns that emissions will add to already compromised air quality and affect the health of a low-income neighborhood. While the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency reports the air quality to be the best it has been in 40 years, it measures a limited number of pollutants. There has long been a need for better ambient air monitoring, especially in west Eugene.

Some have suggested Seneca could use a regenerative selective catalytic reduction system to achieve higher reductions of nitrogen oxide emissions — a system primarily used in the Northeast to retrofit old systems. There is debate over whether this would achieve significant air quality improvements, and additional data about potential use of this technology is warranted.

More importantly, experts agree on the need for a broader look at measures that would yield the most significant air quality improvements in west Eugene. For example, we need more education about the health effects of non-permitted wood burning stoves. Furthermore, LRAPA supports additional air quality monitoring, but funding is a challenge. We should make every effort to find a combination of resources that will allow us to conduct ongoing, real-time air quality monitoring in west Eugene.

My conclusions:

As our president recently stated, we must put aside old wars and reach out to former adversaries in order to save this planet. We must work to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and our contribution to global warming. We don't have perfect solutions, but we are called to do our utmost. We must be vigilant regarding the consequences and impacts of our actions. Biomass utilization, if properly monitored, has great potential but

it also can be misappropriated for simple economic gain, without responsibility for environmental and social justice. The triple bottom line of sustainability requires attention to all of these equally.

I support Seneca's proposal to use its own products more sustainably. I ask the company to make adjustments as new scientific information becomes available and to always bear in mind that it operates in a human setting where its impacts are potentially profound. I challenge Seneca to continually strive for the highest level of emissions and particulate protection possible.