

EDITORIAL: Look through the smoke

Keep Seneca power plant in context

A Thursday meeting sponsored by the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency gave people an opportunity to express concerns about Seneca Sawmill's proposal to generate electricity from wood waste at a power plant north of Eugene. The plant would produce 476 tons of pollutants each year, which sounds like a lot. Before deciding to oppose the plant on that basis, however, people should try to put the 476-ton figure in context.

Most of the plant's pollution by volume, 386 tons, would be carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides. Lane County's major industrial sources of pollution are permitted to emit nearly 16,000 tons of these gases each year. Smaller industries add to the total.

Industrial sources are relatively minor sources of these pollutants — far greater quantities come from cars and trucks. According to LRAPA's most recent inventory, prepared in 2002, gasoline- or diesel-fueled vehicles and equipment pumped 100,000 tons of carbon monoxide into Lane County's air, and 14,000 tons of nitrogen oxides.

The Seneca plant's emissions of other pollutants are in the range of 1 percent of the total from existing industrial sources, and again, greater quantities of some pollutants come from nonindustrial sources. For instance, the plant would emit 26 tons of particulate pollution each year. LRAPA's inventory showed nearly 3,000 tons coming from residential fireplaces and wood stoves. The plant would emit nearly 8 tons of volatile organic compounds. LRAPA tallied 8,000 tons of those compounds coming from vehicles, with wood stoves and fireplaces adding 10,000 tons.

What's more, people should bear in mind that at least some of the wood waste to be burned in the proposed Seneca plant is currently burned in open slash fires. Such fires add pollutants to the atmosphere without the benefit of the clean combustion technology and pollution control equipment Seneca intends to install.

The plant would produce 18.8 megawatts of electricity, enough to serve 13,000 residential customers. That electricity will come from somewhere else if it isn't produced by Seneca. Some new electricity is being generated by windmills and solar panels, but most comes from turbines fired by natural gas. Those turbines also produce emissions. Blocking Seneca's proposal would have the effect of shifting the pollution resulting from Lane County's electricity demand to some other area.

No one wants an additional 476 tons a year of pollutants in Lane County's air. The prospect looks less dire, however, when placed alongside the much larger quantities emitted by other industrial and nonindustrial sources. The volume of pollutants would be offset by a reduction in smoke from slash burning. And whatever the net increase in pollutants would be, Lane County residents would not be asking people in some other area to bear the environmental burden of that portion of their electricity consumption.