

GUEST VIEWPOINT

Seneca's proposed biomass power plant is a win-win

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As the presidents of the West Eugene Community Organization and the Industrial Corridor Community Organization, we strongly support the building of a renewable energy biomass plant northwest of Eugene by Seneca Sustainable Energy, a locally owned family company. We are also concerned about allegations that have been made in recent letters to the editor, supposedly on behalf of businesses and residents in our respective communities.

It is difficult for us to understand why, without justification, anyone would try to derail the building of Seneca's renewable energy plant. This plant will provide an equivalent of enough average energy to serve 13,000 homes in the Eugene area. The plant will create family-wage jobs, both during and after construction.

Opponents have tried to paint Seneca as a polluter. However, Seneca runs the cleanest mill operation in these parts, and likewise, the company's renewable energy plant will be the cleanest in the United States.

The opponents' new approach is to suggest that Seneca is being allowed to site its plant northwest of Eugene because air quality in this area is already degraded. The implication is that the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency may not care about West Eugene's airshed because residents in this area are not as wealthy as residents of downtown and south Eugene and have higher rates of minorities.

We have looked into these allegations. They are simply not true. Air quality northwest of Eugene is better than the air quality in downtown or in south Eugene. Of the nine monitoring sites reviewed by LRAPA, modeling shows that air quality improves as you move north away from Eugene toward the plant proposed by Seneca.

Frankly, when we talk to west Eugene residents, we find that they are more excited about the new jobs that Seneca is creating than they are concerned about Seneca degrading the airshed. We believe this is a tribute to Seneca's investment in the best emission control technology available and LRAPA's reputation for protecting our air quality. Seneca is spending \$11 million of the \$45 million cost of its facility on air emission control equipment. This is double what the company is required to do by law. Seneca should be applauded for its efforts.

There are allegations that Seneca's renewable energy plant will be the largest emitter of four hazardous air pollutants in the Eugene area, when in fact the largest emitters of hazardous air pollutants in Lane County are, by far, vehicles, non-road equipment engines and residential wood stoves.

According to the federal Environmental Protection Agency, total Lane County hazardous pollutant emissions equals 7,724 tons per year. The contribution from Seneca's renewable energy plant would equal only 0.2 percent of the county total. However, even this mischaracterizes the true impact of the plant because its operations will result in a net and substantial decrease in pollutant emissions by avoiding slash burning, reducing truck traffic and eliminating the burning of fossil fuels.

About 25 percent of the fuel for Seneca's facility will come from off-site slash from forest harvest operations. Currently, this slash is disposed of by open burning, as required by the Oregon Forest Practices Act. By burning slash at its biomass plant, Seneca will eliminate 140 tons of nitrous oxide emissions per year and 800 tons of carbon emissions per year. Open burning also generates 32 times more methane and 960 times more hydrocarbons than controlled combustion. Every time there is a slash burn in the forest, it results in 163 times more benzene than the same ton burned in a renewable energy plant such as Seneca's.

Seneca will provide environmental benefits to the surrounding community by decreasing truck trips to and from the sawmill. Currently, all the wood residues from the milling process at the adjacent sawmill are trucked to locations miles away. Once the renewable energy plant is operational, the sawmill's wood residues will be moved by conveyor belt directly to the energy plant. This results in a net decrease of about 4,200 truck trips per year to and from the sawmill, substantially decreasing carbon emissions.

Another fact that has been overlooked is that Seneca's renewable energy plant will produce steam that will be used to replace the fossil fuel that currently fires Seneca Sawmill Co.'s dry kilns. This will have the effect of reducing yearly carbon emissions by 3,500 tons and decreasing our dependence upon foreign oil.

Seneca's renewable energy plant is a win-win for both the west Eugene and northwest Eugene communities. As Seneca's neighbors, we welcome the company's investment in our community. It will bring benefits to all of us for years.

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