

EDITORIAL

Seneca aces air quality test

Wood-fired power plant gets LRAPA permit

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Suppose that a neighbor, after many years of disposing of yard debris in a backyard burn barrel, one day installed a certified clean-burning stove instead. The stove still emits air pollution, but the net result is a substantial improvement in air quality.

That's what will happen when Seneca Sustainable Energy LLC builds its wood-burning power plant in northwest Eugene: The Willamette Valley will gain a new source of air pollution, but another dirtier source will be reduced when logging debris formerly burned as slash is used to produce electricity instead.

The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency granted Seneca an air discharge permit last Friday, adding a list of conditions as a result of public testimony. LRAPA's job is to ensure that a permit application meets air quality standards — and given that narrow scope of discretion, approval of Seneca's permit was all but assured. Even if the agency had the authority to pass judgment on a wider range of issues, however, approval would have been deserved. Seneca's project has broad benefits related to the environment, the economy and the energy supply.

The biomass plant will be one of Lane County's largest sources of industrial air pollution, emitting up to 481 tons of pollutants each year, including 17 million tons of toxic pollutants. That will represent 0.3 percent of the pollution from all sources, and 0.2 percent of the toxics. Most of the Willamette Valley's air pollution comes from non-industrial sources, including vehicles and fireplaces.

The Seneca plant's emissions, modest though they are in context, should be considered in light of offsetting air quality benefits.

About a quarter of the plant's fuel is expected to come from forest slash, and the switch from open fires to controlled combustion will reduce particulate pollution by 99 percent.

The 18.8 megawatts of power from the plant will either reduce local demand for electricity produced by burning natural gas, or provide a firm source of power as a backup for intermittent supplies such as wind energy. Seneca's wood waste will be burned on site rather than transported elsewhere, eliminating 4,300 truck trips yearly. Biomass energy is counted as carbon-neutral, because the carbon contained in wood waste would eventually be released through fire or decay.

Add it all up, and the plant's effect on air quality is negligible or positive.

Much of the testimony received by LRAPA had to do not with the Seneca project specifically, but forest biomass generally — some fear the transformation of Oregon's forests into energy farms. It would be wrong to evaluate Seneca's concrete proposal on the basis of what might hypothetically come next, and forest practices are beyond LRAPA's regulatory reach.

But Seneca's project could prove to be a rarity: The company has a reliable supply of fuel from its own operations and nearby lands, transportation costs are relatively low and it has on-site access to the electric grid. Few other biomass projects are likely to have so many advantages.

Merlyn Hough, LRAPA's executive director, said that the Seneca plant "will be the most stringently controlled and rigorously monitored of its type in the Pacific Northwest, and possibly the country." If any industrial permit application deserved to be a slam-dunk, this was it.
