

Seneca's plan a model for federal forests

By Darrel Kenops

The Register-Guard's Jan. 28 editorial, "More from every log," rightly praises the plans of Seneca Sustainable Energy to build a \$45 million, 18.8-megawatt biomass power plant on its northwest Eugene industrial site. The plant will generate renewable energy from sawmill byproducts and slash from the company's timberlands. The project will not only benefit the company by cutting its energy costs, but it will serve the greater community by reducing dependence on fossil fuels, complementing intermittent renewable energy sources such as wind and solar, and putting more people to work.

Seneca's commendable effort uses biomass from its own private forests. Now just imagine what we can do if we apply Seneca's example to our federal forests in Oregon.

Public and private forests cover nearly half the state. Of those forest lands, six of every 10 acres are federally managed. However, unlike private and state forests, many of these forests are unhealthy, insect infested and fire prone, presenting what might rightly be termed an opportunity disguised as a problem.

Converting wood from overstocked forests to energy offers a unique opportunity to simultaneously address three challenges: the need to restore the health of Oregon's federal forests, the need to find renewable energy alternatives and the need to revitalize Oregon's rural communities.

First, fire suppression policies, coupled with the effects of climate change without active forest fuels management on a corresponding scale, have led to conditions that now put our forests at risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfire.

An estimated 9 million to 13 million acres of federally owned forests are in need of restoration thinning and prescribed burning, especially in southern, central and eastern Oregon. Thinning and prescribed burning will improve forest health and fire resilience.

Second, thinning can provide a long-term source of renewable energy from woody biomass. Energy generated from woody biomass can help Oregon achieve its goal of supplying 25 percent of the state's energy needs from renewable resources by 2025. Converting forest biomass to energy can reduce Oregon's carbon output, not only because of its carbon neutrality, but also because removing biomass from overcrowded forests allows the remaining trees to do a better job of storing carbon. Reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and foreign oil additionally supports national security and trade goals.

Third, creating a new industry based on restoring federal forests and using woody biomass to generate electricity would create hundreds of well-paying jobs in rural Oregon communities suffering from double-digit unemployment.

The timing of this issue is both critical and apt. It's critical because many of our federal forests are extremely unhealthy. Our citizens need jobs. Our environment needs mending. It's apt because awareness of the problem and the will to seize the opportunities have perhaps never been greater.

Fortunately, there is broad support for taking action now. Cooperation is developing among stakeholders at the federal, state and local levels. There is the potential addition of federal economic stimulus funding to the state directed at hazardous fuels reduction. This could give us a rare opportunity to create a level of investment in our federal forests that will reverse the trends of severe wildfire, declining jobs and eroding timber-sector infrastructure, with the added benefits of reducing our dependence on fossil fuels. It can be an investment in sound forest management that bolsters Oregon's natural capital to ensure long-term ecological, economic and societal health.

Seneca is showing what one company can do. Now it's up to the rest of us.

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