

GUEST VIEWPOINT

When it comes to renewable energy, wood holds promise

BY GREG CORBIN

Saturday, January 9, 2010

Woody biomass as a fuel to produce renewable energy provides a solid alternative to fossil fuels. It's one of the world's oldest sources of energy, and here in the Pacific Northwest, it's a nice complement to intermittent sources of renewable energy such as wind and solar.

An excellent example of this is moving forward right here in Eugene. The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency recently approved a permit for Seneca Sustainable Energy LLC to build a new 18.8 megawatt renewable energy biomass plant. When completed, the plant will help Eugene Water & Electric Board customers by providing a new and reliable energy facility to help meet future growth needs and offset power requirements that may have come from fossil-fueled facilities.

But that's not the end of the story. Throughout much of Oregon, there are at least two other good reasons to use woody biomass for energy production. It would create new jobs for Oregonians and improve the health of our forestlands.

Most of Oregon's federal forestlands are in deep trouble because they are overstocked with trees that are sickly, stressed and often infested with bugs that kill them. Although the Seneca plant won't use much biomass from federal lands, many of those forests would benefit from such use.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, nearly 40 percent of Oregon forestland is classified as Class 3, or at "high risk" of intense fire. Another 45 percent is classified as Class 2, or at "moderate risk" of fire. Officials estimate that between 9 million and 13 million acres of these forestlands are in need of improvement.

Harvesting excess woody biomass under laws that already are established is a sensible form of forestry management that can help improve these forests' ecological health and reduce the chance that severe fire will completely destroy them, their wildlife habitat and their watersheds.

And when used as a source of renewable energy, it also would keep the lights on when the sun goes down or the wind does not blow.

Let's remember that the Oregon Legislature has established a renewable energy standard that requires the state's utilities to meet 25 percent of their energy needs from

renewable energy supplies by 2025. Renewable electric energy from woody biomass such as Seneca's plant will play a part.

The state's long-range objective was set with eyes wide open, knowing full well that there are always some environmental impacts to energy production. But in the case of woody biomass generation, it holds promise to help forests, provide employment and produce new sources of renewable energy.

Portland attorney Greg Corbin has a master's degree in forest science and is a member of the Society of American Foresters. Forest product companies are among his clients.