

BATTLE OVER biomass

Does Seneca's plant violate pollution regs?

STORY & PHOTOS BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

A slow procession of cars made its way down East Enid Road off Highway 99 in west Eugene, each turning into the gates of Seneca Sawmill's new biomass cogeneration plant and getting checked off by a security officer with a clipboard. For Seneca, and many of its invited guests, the procession was leading to a celebration. For the protesters gathering near the gates, it was leading to a funeral for clean air and for Oregon's forests.

One protester, Johannes Rune Pedersen, according to Lane County Sheriff's Office records, was not content to watch the line of cars and shout and sign wave to make his point about the dangers of the biomass plant. He was willing to risk life and limb to get heard.

At a little past 10 am, just as Seneca's ribbon-cutting event was slated to get under way, Pedersen u-locked himself by the neck to the underside of a station wagon pulling into Seneca's gates. If the car continued to drive it would drag Pedersen with it, possibly breaking his neck. Within moments the line of cars had ground to a halt, and the area was crawling with angry sheriff's deputies.

Seneca's 18.8-megawatt biomass plant has been touted as sustainable energy by Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWB), which is buying power generated by the wood-burning plant. The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency approved its permit. It's due to get millions in tax credits from Oregon's Business Energy Tax Credit (BETC) program for utilizing a "renewable resource" — Oregon's forests. So what is it about Seneca Sustainable Energy's cogeneration plant that brought 25 protesters out on a dreary weekday morning, one of them willing to risk his own neck, to get their voices heard? It turns out that Seneca's biomass is a bit of a biomass, from its controversial old-growth logging to its maybe not-so-Clean Air Act-approved emissions.

Locking down on biomass

In the first chaotic minutes of Pedersen's nonviolent direct action, as deputies and state troopers swarmed the scene, it was difficult to ascertain what was going on. Pedersen's legs and feet were visible out from under the red Subaru wagon. A tall, burly blonde sheriff was kneeling on them, as if Pedersen was going to suddenly make a break

for it, despite the hefty bike lock fastening him to the car. Members of Cascadia Forest Defenders, Ecosystem Advocates Northwest and other protesters held signs proclaiming "Don't Cut Off Our Oxygen," "Biomass is Not Green" and "Seneca Lies!" and called out to the cars held up by Pedersen's prone body and the law enforcement vehicles.

Jason Gonzales, a member of CFD, said the deputies refused to let Pedersen's support crew remain nearby to help ensure his safety. Two other protesters, later identified as Zach Waddell and Emmalyn Garrett, were kneeling, handcuffed, by Seneca's gates. Gonzales said the deputies had pushed the other protesters away. Most of the demonstrators wound up across the road, or backed against the chainlink and barbed wire fence that rings the plant.

An *EW* reporter's attempts to speak to the deputies were loudly and angrily rebuffed by Deputy Marvin Combs with gesticulations and shouts of, "Go away! This is not Eugene!"

To be precise, Seneca Sustainable Energy (SSE) is not exactly in Eugene; it is just outside the city limits. It is thus exempt from the Eugene Toxics Right-to-Know ordinance that would allow Eugeneans to see what chemicals the plant is using. But what it will emit is on record, thanks to its air pollution permit.

The plant will release 200,000 tons of carbon dioxide, 185.61 tons of nitrogen oxides, 200.89 tons of carbon monoxide, 1.7 tons of formaldehyde and more than 13 tons each of PM 10 and PM 2.5 (particulate matter) over the course of a year. Lisa Arkin of Oregon Toxics Alliance (OTA), which did not participate in the protest but has fought Seneca's permit from the beginning, said, "You may not be in the city limits, but you're in our airshed."

Seneca is "refusing to acknowledge that their emissions move away from the facility," and into the city, she said.

Gonzales said protesters also had been met with the shouts of "This ain't Eugene," as well as with physical force. A neutral observer with the National Lawyers Guild and trained by Eugene-based Civil Liberties Defense Center monitored the events. Lauren Regan of the CLDC said the overreaction from law enforcement might have been due to an assumption that "there's going to be a longstanding campaign with the plant as target," and she surmised the deputies were trying to frighten protesters so they wouldn't come back.

The biomass burning issue, Regan said, is not one that's going to go away, and it's an "issue that's going to attract a



'GO AWAY! THIS IS NOT EUGENE.'
— Deputy Combs

lot of public attention; it will impact a large portion of the community and Seneca needs to be ready for the public to express its grievances."

Regan continued, "This is a long-term campaign that the activists have put together and we're going to support it on the legal side." She said the protesters "are well trained on their legal rights," and CLDC will have legal observers to monitor future events and the actions of police as well as protesters.

Seneca "could change that by deciding not to become a biomass plant, but that's very unlikely," Regan pointed out.

The fire department arrived with equipment to break the lock holding the protester to the car. Bill Thompson, a captain with the sheriff's office, wearing a light blue sport coat instead of the deputies' brown and tan uniform, answered questions after Pedersen was cut loose.

Thompson said that the invitation-only Seneca event featured community leaders and politicians, and that "folks from Cascadia Forest Defenders feel strongly this project is not in the best interest of the environment." He clarified that it was not clear if Pedersen, Garrett or Waddell were associated with CFD. According to Thompson, Garrett and Waddell had blocked the Subaru as it entered Seneca's gates while "the third subject" climbed beneath the car and locked himself to it.

Lane County jail records show that they were all charged with disorderly conduct in the second degree, a misdemeanor.

Nathaniel, a Cascadia Forest Defender who declined to give his last name, said he was protesting Seneca because he was "tired of seeing false solutions and greenwashing marketed to a community like Eugene that is very susceptible to it." He said that he works in the forest, and what is left after trees and slash have been removed for biomass is "a moonscape." The forest, he said, needs decaying dead trees and snags to sustain

Taste of India

Buffet Lunch Special

\$8.99 all you can eat.
7 days a week.

★ Voted Best Buffet
-Eugene Weekly Readers

★ Voted Best
Indian Restaurant
-Eugene Weekly Readers

★ Best Indian
Restaurant In Town
-Register Guard Readers 2010



Campus Location

Now Open!

844 E 13th ave
(old Sakura location)

Student Lunch Buffet Special

\$5.99 (to go only)

Catering available • Full menu available to go • Delivery through Pony Express
2495 Hilyard St. • Eugene, OR 97405 • ph & fax (541) 485-9698 • ph only (541) 485-9560



NY DOGS

WRAPPED IN
BAGEL DOUGH

Hebrew National Kosher Franks!

BAGELSPHERE®

810 Willamette • 541-341-1335 | 4089 W. 11th • 541-868-1072

Open Daily | www.bagelsphere.com