

Forest for the trees

Biomass burning to generate electricity is about clean air in Eugene but also about the forests around it. That fact was hit home when a log truck bringing a load of timber to Seneca sawmill raced by the protesters so fast that its wind and blaring horn startled Ceila Starshine Levine and blew her into a ditch as she stood on the side of the road holding a sign reading, "Biomass Burning Destroys Our Forests."

In response to a question from *EW* about the legality of the truck speeding by the protest, Deputy Combs, standing in front of Seneca gate the truck had turned into, asked "What truck?"

The speeding truck, the angry logger behind the wheel and belligerent law enforcement bring to mind the face-offs between loggers and activists during the logging wars of the Northwest in the 1990s. But these days, with only a few exceptions, it's energy and climate change, not old growth, that are causing the clashes between corporations and ecowarriors.

Will Potter, author of *Green is the New Red*, who will be speaking on "ecoterrorism" at the UO May 17, said after a "lull in the amount of both underground actions and more public direct action," there has been a resurgence of protests about hot button issues of energy and climate change. And a "disproportionate police response" has been a factor in environmental civil obedience all along.

Seneca is involved in both the energy issue and the old growth issue: As Seneca Sustainable Energy, it's burning wood in its biomass cogeneration plant, and as Seneca Jones Timber Company and Seneca Sawmill it's logging Oregon's forests, then cutting the trees up in the mill adjoining SSE.

EWEB Commissioner Joann Ernst came to the Seneca protest not to address the biomass issue, but to take on Seneca for its ongoing efforts to log an old growth forest, the Trapper timber sale in the McKenzie River watershed — the source of Eugene's clean water.

"Seneca is being a very bad neighbor cutting down old growth when it's been offered an alternative," Ernst said.

Trapper, as well as tracts in the Elliott State Forest, which Seneca also logs, has been the locus of treesits and other protests. But according to Samantha Chirillo of Ecosystem Advocates Northwest, also present at the Seneca protest, last week's arrests marks the first time activists have been arrested protesting biomass.

Seneca is "a company that doesn't care about this state's forests," said Erin Grady, a point person for CFD.

Biomessy Energy

EWEB has agreed to purchase some of Seneca's subsidized energy to replace what it is losing when the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) changes the way it allocates power. EWEB spokesman Lance Robertson said



ERIN GRADY AND OTHER CASCADIA FOREST DEFENDERS PROTEST AT SENECA'S GATES

this fall EWEB will lose 10 to 15 percent of cheap BPA power and needs to replace it. He estimates that Seneca can supply about 5 or 6 percent of that power EWEB needs. It won't be as cheap as BPA power because renewable energy is more expensive than other sources, Robertson said. But he said EWEB wanted to stay with local energy sources. Seneca was going to sell the energy either way, and there is "an advantage to a local entity purchasing that power rather than other entities outside the state."

Is biomass renewable energy? "The Oregon Legislature has designated biomass as a renewable resource under the state's renewable energy portfolio," Robertson said. He said an EWEB citizens committee that started meeting about two months ago will discuss, among other issues, whether biomass is a viable option in the future.

Though the chances of valuable old growth trees winding up as biomass are probably slim, their branches and other logging "waste" that is often burnt in the forest as slash could wind up generating energy for EWEB and so for Eugene homes. But according to Chirillo, "The fact is that they won't rule out logging for fuel. We can't see what is in the contract, so we can't rule out that we're burning old growth forests."

"It's not speculation that Seneca is going to chip and burn whole trees," Chirillo said. Other Oregon biomass

plants, she said, are chipping "non-merchantable trees" which are too small to make into two-by-fours.

Chirillo added that biomass industry is dependent on subsidies. "Other states like Massachusetts are cutting back on subsidies," and she said if the subsidies begin to dry up or are restricted in the future then biomass as a source of energy isn't as reliable as people think. In January, the EPA deferred regulating greenhouse gas emissions from biomass burning for three years to assess the global warming consequences of burning wood for energy.

Just how much in subsidies is Seneca actually getting? According to Diana Enright, communications manager for the Oregon Department of Energy, Seneca Sustainable Energy applied for a BETC in January 2009, and got a preliminary certification for up to a \$10 million tax credit — 50 percent of the eligible project cost of \$20 million. She said there were changes in 2010 to BETC, and SSE will not get a tax credit until the project is completed and the paperwork is reviewed. She said the Oregon DOE has not yet received the final BETC application from SSE. According to DOE documents, Seneca also received about \$170,000 in stimulus funding for variable frequency drive upgrades on its new plant.

According to the Cascadia Forest Defenders, "The only thing green about this plant is the money." **EW**



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