

TONS OF POLLUTION

Seneca applies to increase its emissions to 17 tons

Seneca Sustainable Energy, the biomass burning plant, is applying to increase the particulate pollution that it is emitting into the air of west Eugene by 3 tons. The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency is hosting an informational meeting about the requested air quality permit alteration July 17 and asking for public comment. Ironically the agency says that “ultimately, if a facility meets all legal requirements, LRAPA will issue the facility’s modified air quality permit.” So while the agency will take public comment, the comments won’t stop the permit from being approved.

The biomass plant has been touted as “sustainable” and “renewable,” but environmentalists and public health advocates have spoken out against the Seneca plant for years, alleging Seneca burns whole trees, rather than just logging waste, and criticizing the pollutants and particulate matter the plant sends into the airshed. There are three schools within 3 miles of the plant, and the nearest residential home is within 1,500 feet.

According to LRAPA’s meeting notice, Seneca emits “particulate matter, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, volatile organic compounds, greenhouse gases and hazardous air pollutants to the air.”

Studies show that particulate matter both causes and exacerbates asthma. The Environmental Protection Agency says that PM 10 (particulate matter less than 10 microns in size) and smaller particles “can get deep into your lungs, and some may even get into your bloodstream.”

Seneca’s original permit called for the plant, which burns wood and turns it into electricity via steam, to puff

out 14 tons of PM 10 a year. The new permit would allow for 17 tons of PM 10 and also 17 tons of PM 2.5, “according to the regulations that went into effect after the source was originally permitted.”

Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics, says that the group complained to LRAPA from the outset that the plant site emission limits “were arbitrary and capricious and don’t really reflect the particular character of that facility or the neighbors surrounding it, the community or this airshed.”

“The whole thing is kicking Eugene in the teeth,” Arkin says. She points to the group’s recently released “West Eugene Environmental Justice — Environmental Health Assessment Report,” which shows that children in the west Eugene 97402 zip code where Seneca is located have a 14.3 percent asthma rate versus 8.1 percent in schools in other Eugene zip codes. The 97402 zip also has the highest level of residents below the poverty line and the highest percentage of Hispanics compared to the other five zip codes that comprise Eugene, she says.

The plant emits particulates both in the air it discharges (filterable emissions) and in the water vapor (condensable). Chris Zinda, who has been fighting a biomass plant in Lakeview that used the Seneca plant as a comparable in its permitting process, says that the state of Oregon didn’t account for the total amount of emissions — just filterable emissions not condensable — until forced to by the EPA in 2012. He says that the change in the permit now accounts

for those condensables and the result is a tripling of the amount of PM 2.5 emitted from the plant.

Seneca says its plant is one of the cleanest in the country. LRAPA permit writer Max Hueftle says that the increase in emissions means the plant will be considered a major source of air pollution; however, he says that the reason for the increase is not a physical increase of emissions but because “they were concerned that over the operating life of the plant there’s too much uncertainty.” He says when the plant was built, PM 2.5 was not yet regulated.

Zinda says, “My argument is the state DEQ and LRAPA know they were issuing permits that didn’t meet Title V” of the Clean Air Act. He says that Seneca was grandfathered into pre-2011 Clean Air Act rules and so avoided “best available control technology” and accounting for the total amount of pollution offsets from its processes. Zinda says that while the EPA determines the federal standards for pollution from biomass plants, the state or LRAPA could establish tighter standards to protect the air.

According to Hueftle, Seneca purchased offsets from International Paper in Springfield at a two-to-one ratio per ton. These offsets were “previously banked” by International Paper.

Arkin says, “There’s cap and trade for you. Allowing someone to market questionable offsets.” Beyond Toxics’ environmental justice study shows that 99 percent of air toxics in Eugene are emitted in west Eugene. — *Camilla Mortensen*

To see the Beyond Toxics study go to tinyurl.com/nunwlc3, and to get more information on the LRAPA informational meeting 6:30 pm July 17 at Harris Hall, 125 E. 8th Ave., go to wkly.ws/1id or call 541-735-1056.

SLANT

- On July 17 LRAPA is holding an informational meeting about **Seneca Sustainable Energy biomass plant’s** permit application to emit tons more particulate matter into west Eugene air. That’s more small particles that kids breathe into their lungs and more pollution into our airshed. Buying carbon credits from International Paper in Springfield doesn’t help the two elementary schools that are within two miles of the biomass burning. Go to the meeting; find out more. Make public comments on the permit. And let’s work to make the laws more stringent in Oregon to protect our air, lungs and forests. For more info on the meeting go to wkly.ws/1id.

- The **Seneca Jones Timber** Company and associated family enterprises are running a series of peculiar newspaper ads in the *R-G* and *The Oregonian* featuring Aaron Jones’ daughters Kathy, Jody and Becky out in the woods, being “connected to the land.” Why? Well, Seneca wants a permit to release more polluting particulates from its biomass plant in Eugene, and the company has a big public relations problem. While one of its ads tells people that accusing the timber company of logging old growth is “barking up the wrong tree,” it’s no secret the family’s millions were made from decades of clearcutting ancient forests on both private and public lands, and Seneca money has funded right-wing candidates and causes at the local, state and national levels. It’s a little late to talk about sustainability.

- Thought we were blowing smoke in our news briefs last week when we warned that **oil trains in Oregon** could derail and spill? The news of the oil train

derailment and massive fire in a small town in Quebec, Canada, July 6 is horrifying. News reports say that 30 buildings were destroyed, including a crowded bar, and the death toll is still unclear with 13 known dead and 40 missing. The train was reportedly carrying fracked oil from the Bakken oil field of North Dakota. These types of trains are running through the Columbia Gorge, next to the river and the small towns along the way. They are running on the same tracks as the coal trains, which lose coal dust that can make the tracks unstable and trains more likely to derail. It’s time to stop Oregon from being a fossil fuel pipeline. Speak up about coal export, fracking and Big Oil.

- Plans to expand the downtown **Farmers Market** taking over one lane of 8th Avenue for one block from South Park to Willamette this month have been shelved. It’s not been easy to hammer out an agreement between the Farmers Market, the Saturday Market and the city of Eugene, especially in this busy season. Grab your basket and visit the markets Saturday, Tuesday or Thursday. You’ll see why we all need to find more space for next year and beyond.

- Big announcement for us just out from Secretary Shaun Donovan of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. **Shelley Poticha**, who grew up in Eugene and whose parents live here, is leaving HUD for the powerful environmental group, Natural Resources Defense Council, to be the director of the Urban Solutions program. As director of the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities in HUD since 2009 in D.C., she has led

“what has arguably been the largest planning effort in the nation since the mid 1970s,” Donovan says. NRDC is sure to be more nimble than the feds, a new adventure for the former Eugenean.

- Last week** in this column we asked if there were “any NDE [near-death experience] skeptics out there?” Coincidentally that was the same day (July 3) that *Esquire* magazine online published its long exposé on Dr. Eben Alexander, author of *Proof of Heaven* and a recent speaker at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene. Journalists are professional skeptics and *Esquire* writer Luke Dittrich finds several things to be skeptical about in his investigation (see our blog for a link to the story). We are reminded of director Ang Lee’s *Life of Pi* film in which the character Pi Patel, after telling two contradictory tales, asks, “Which story do you prefer?” Good storytelling takes us places we might not otherwise go.

- If journalism is going down the drain, as the press keeps telling us, why did the **School of Journalism and Communication** graduate more majors than any other UO program in June? One answer: *The Oregonian* recently quoted a bankrate.com study showing that students’ best return on college investment according to time of study needed for a degree, median compensation and the time it would take to repay student loans with 10 percent of salary going toward repayment is in — you guessed it — advertising, marketing and promotion. Students flock to the UO school for majors in advertising and PR — not really journalism, but certainly profitable.