



A stacker reclaimer digs up scoops of coal to feed the Boardman plant.

Coal: For all the environmental benefits, the closure of the plant has a human cost

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fuel” at a plant like Boardman, said Matt Krumenauer, vice president of the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities.

According to Krumenauer, torrefaction has benefits beyond the bottom line. It finds use for low-value wood, which in turn supports local timber jobs and can help make rural Oregon safer. Krumenauer, who is also the CEO of Restoration Fuels, said torrefaction can lead to a “reduction in wildfire smoke, reduction of overall wildfires.”

Restoration Fuels is focused on exporting torrefied biomass to factories in Europe and Asia. But the long-term goal is to create a local market for biomass and the power it can create. Krumenauer and Restoration Fuels are building the first North American commercial scale facility in John Day, set to open this summer.

Due to high transportation costs, however, it can be expensive to implement torrefaction in less-wooded terrain. Just driving the biomass three hours from the dry pine forests of John Day to the sage desert of Boardman would cost about \$300 per load — and that doesn’t include the costs of cutting, loading or chipping the lumber.

Because of that, “you’re at a loss for every single ton of biomass you use,” said Krumenauer.

That proved a fatal blow to the transformation of the Boardman plant. It would simply cost too much to transport tons of torrefied biomass to be worthwhile. Torrefaction was axed from consideration, and with it any hope that the plant would remain in operation.

“That story is over,” said Corson. “We will decommission it.”

Human cost

For all the environmental benefits, the closure of the plant has a human cost. In addition to prior staff reductions, Boardman employs 67 full-time workers who earn an average salary of nearly \$110,000 per year — well above the county, state and national averages. In addition, contractors and local vendors, such as Boardman’s fuels and lubricants distributor, will also lose an important customer.

“Those are coveted jobs,” said Morrow County Commissioner Don Russell, who said the plant has helped support the Boardman economy for decades.

Plant manager Dave Rodgers said he was able to send his children to college thanks to a career at the plant. His daughter now works for NASA and his son is an accountant in Portland.

In addition to providing livable paychecks, Portland General Electric supported the community in other ways.

“If you needed someone to coach a Little League team or be involved in the local chamber of commerce, there’s always been PGE employees involved in that,” said Commissioner Russell.

When the plant closes, Corson said some employees will retire, some will be

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Steve Corson | Portland General Electric spokesperson

transferred to other plants around the state and others may attend Blue Mountain Community College, where Portland General Electric is funding a scholarship program.

“No employee in good standing will leave the company without the benefit of our support as they make this transition,” said Corson.

A new wind

Even though the coal plant will close, residents of Morrow County are already preparing for a new energy future. The county will continue to remain an important seat in the regional energy transmission system, and for Portland General Electric.

“We’ll have a very strong presence in Morrow County for a long time to come,” said Corson.

As part of the state’s push toward renewable energy and away from high emissions produced by coal, Portland General Electric and Pacific Power, along with organizations such as the Oregon Environmental Council, Northwest Energy Coalition and Sierra Club, came together to support the 2016 Oregon Clean Electricity & Coal Transition Plan. The plan called for Oregon to double the use of new renewable energy in the state to 50% by 2040 and end coal generation entirely.

Portland General Electric developed its own goal to reduce 80% of its 1990 level emissions by 2050. To help meet that mark, they partnered with NextEra Energy.

According to NextEra, the company is the “world’s largest generator of renewable energy from the wind and sun.” The company has a generation capacity of 21,000 megawatts, a majority of which is produced by their 119 wind farms spread across North America.

The two companies are working together on building a renewable energy facility across both Morrow and Umatilla counties that would be one of the country’s largest. The 380-megawatt Wheatridge Renewable Energy facility will convert wind and solar energy to produce roughly two-thirds of the energy that the coal plant did — with none of the air pollution emissions.

Port of Morrow Director Ryan Neal said Wheatridge, and projects like it, “are critical to the growth and economy of the region.”

The new energy facility will also have an impact through Strategic Investment Program agreements that will help fund educational programs for Morrow County students. A SIP agreement means that after the first \$25 million in taxable income, the companies will pay a portion of their income to local entities in lieu of property taxes.

The county has a 15-year SIP agreement with Wheatridge. If built to its full

potential, the project could lead to nearly \$5 million in annual SIP payments to Morrow County.

Legislation

When Gov. Kate Brown signed the Oregon Clean Electricity & Coal Transition Plan in 2016, she committed Oregon to be the first state in the nation to end coal-fired power.

Rebecca Smith saw the Boardman closure as a sign that “Oregon was on the bleeding edge” of America’s transition away from coal.

“In Oregon, we like to do it our own way,” she said. “We’re not following the ‘California solution’ or anything like that. We’re like, ‘OK, we have this much hydro, we have these people, these are our costs, these are the protections we want, this is how we’re going to approach it.’”

Across the country and the world, the economic argument for renewable energy is strengthening, while the economic and environmental arguments for coal weaken. The cost of generating solar energy has dropped 89% in the past decade, while wind power costs have dropped 70%, according to global financial advisers at Lazard. A company that generates power with solar energy rather than coal now makes an additional \$69 per megawatt hour.

“I see this as the future of electricity generation,” said Smith. “Oregon is moving towards cleaner, and frankly cheaper, electricity.”

Companies have noticed the economic forces at play. Over the next two decades, more than 30 coal projects from Montana to Arizona are scheduled to close. Many, like in Boardman, are closing well before the end of their design life.

“The push for decarbonization and clean electricity is also happening globally,” said Smith. “And Oregon is definitely part of that march forward.”

In Morrow County, that march includes the closure of the state’s last coal plant and the construction of one of the nation’s largest renewable energy facilities.

The closing is hard for people like Rodgers, who spilled a career’s worth of sweat at the plant, and for Russell, who must pay the county’s bills and balance its budget. But both said there is a sense of pride in Boardman and hope for the future of energy production in the region.

“I can honestly say I feel really proud about what we did here” said Rodgers. Later, he noted that “change happens ... life goes on.”

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