BIOMASS: Will produce 3.8 million cubic feet of renewable gas each day

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can be captured and stored.

Joe Burke, Novus president and CEO, said the company has found a way to make that process 40 percent more efficient and is now ready for commercial-scale production. The USDA loan was critical to making the project a reality, Burke said.

"We just can't wait to go to the next step," he said.

Novus has spent several years already in Eastern Oregon, conducting small-scale tests using local food waste inside a retrofitted semi-trailer. Burke said he has been working on and off for three years toward a commercial refinery at the Port of Morrow.

The issue ultimately came down to financing. Despite successful tests, Burke said banks wouldn't lend them money. However, the 2014 Farm Bill expanded the USDA's biorefinery program to allow the agency to invest in advanced biofuels and renewable chemicals.

Mensah said Novus is one of the first companies to receive a loan under that expansion.

"It's a very competitive program," Mensah told the *East Oregonian*. "We are pleased to see this innovation happening in rural America."

Novus will break ground on its facility at the port later this summer, Burke said, which will be located near Boardman Foods. The total cost is $25 million, and the plant will provide 5-10 permanent, full-time jobs.

At full operation, Novus will produce 3.8 million cubic feet of renewable gas each day. That's more than 28 million gallons, which will be pumped directly into the Cascade pipeline on their property. A subsidiary of BP is signed on to buy the fuel.

The plant will also generate 350 gallons of liquid fertilizer daily.

"We're taking waste and turning it into valuable resources. We're very excited about that," Burke said.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Dr. Derek Earl is the medical director for Family Health Associates and is one of seven doctors that will spend time working at the wellness center at Hermiston High School.

BILL: Republican minority report could prevent measure from coming to a vote during the session

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to gain support of state Sen. Chris Edwards, D-Eugene, who was previously lukewarm on the legislation.

Biomass is politically popular in rural areas of the state and communities with timber mills where wood waste can be used as fuel. At the same time, some environmentalists have questioned whether biomass should qualify as renewable energy, and researchers have found burning wood can release more carbon than coal.

The renewable energy bill moving through the Oregon Legislature would require PacifiCorp and Portland General Electric to stop using coal power to serve their Oregon customers. It would also require the utilities use sources such as solar and wind to serve 50 percent of their customers' energy demand by 2040. The House passed the bill last week.

"For those of us that have been looking for a path forward for biomass viability as a power source, this is the most substantial piece of legislation we've had," Edwards said during a hearing on the bill at the House Committee on Rules Thursday night. Edwards said biomass incentives would help create or keep jobs in Oregon, given that even a southern Oregon sawmill owner had recently told Edwards he planned to shut down a biomass plant because it would be cheaper to use natural gas.

The House Committee on Rules ultimately voted on Thursday to insert the latest version of the renewable energy bill, including the biomass provision, into another piece of legislation and send that bill to the House for a floor vote. They did so in order to revive the bill after it stalled in the face of Republican opposition in the Senate.

Republicans in the Senate, who oppose the bill, are drafting a minority report. There is no deadline to produce the report, so the move could prevent the measure from coming to a vote before the end of the session.

Many House Republicans also oppose the bill and decided to employ the same tactic as their Senate colleagues. It will not buy much of a delay, however: under House rules, the minority report must be submitted by 5 p.m. Friday. That means the House could vote on the bill by the middle of next week, and the Senate could hold a final vote on the bill soon afterward. Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield, said on Thursday there are enough votes for the bill to pass the Senate.

The latest version of the bill requires PacifiCorp and Portland General Electric to get at least 8 percent of their total electrical capacity by 2025 from either small power projects under 20 megawatts or biomass plants. There is no cap on the size of the biomass power plants, although Edwards said he plans to introduce legislation to add a 20 megawatt limit during the next legislative session.

HEALTH: Not open to general public

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center just like they would at any doctor's office, but because the Wellness Center only serves the district, it has shorter wait times and tailored appointments. Patients at the Wellness Center have ranged from adults nearing retirement to infants just weeks old. The needs have ranged as well, from colds to concussions.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Student artwork hangs in the waiting room at the new wellness center at Hermiston High School.

"We're really all about trying to get that kid seen and get them well. We're working with the parent or guardian, we're working with the school, we're working with the patient to get them seen and well," Fitzmorris said. "We've seen a couple of kids and stitched them up after their laceration and they come back in for their suture removal. We've seen everything from the common cold to the well-child check to make sure they're caught up on their vaccinations. Whatever comes through the door is usually seen or taken care of."

The facility is not open to the general public, and students are only seen with written consent from parents. New patients who walk through the door can fill out paperwork and bill their insurance just like they would at the FHA main office at Good Shepherd Medical Center.

Family Health Associates includes four doctors and three nurse practitioners. The providers each rotate through the Wellness Center so the office is staffed each day it is open. Earl is no stranger to the Hermiston School District: His own three children are students, and he has done sports physicals for more than a decade.

"A large number of the students and staff were already our patients at Family Health Associates, so it is an extension of that," he said. "It's also given us an opportunity to serve people we don't normally see a doctor.

"The biggest surprise for us is that we've had consistent patients. Our goals for this was never to make money — it was to provide a service."

He said the clinic is now considering expanding hours to meet the need.

The Wellness Center is open from 8 a.m. to noon on Mondays and from noon to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday. The center is open on district inservice days but closed on district holidays, such as spring break.

HOUSING: Clearing blight from existing homes difficult

Continued from 1A

could find affordable, quality housing.

The city, BMCC, Umatilla County and the Round-Up Development Corp. are teaming up to fund an updated housing study. At the meeting, Pacific Power spokesman Bill Clemens said his company would also contribute funding toward the $9,000-$10,000 study.

Turner believes that the results from the study will show positive post-recession trends in housing development and demand, and will be a valuable tool in recruiting developers.

The city still faces many economic, legal and geographic challenges in boosting Pendleton's flagging housing market.

Pendleton engineering technician George Clough presented a map that showed large swaths of land was unusable because it was zoned industrial or exclusive farm use.

Even the land that was zoned for housing didn't mean housing was feasible on it. Pendleton's bowl-shaped topography meant some land was too steep while other areas were too low and in a flood plain.

"Pendleton looks nice and rectangular in our mapping, but that doesn't happen to be the truth," he said.

Pendleton's urban growth boundary is another obstacle to housing developments.

Established in the early 1970s under then-governor Tom McCall, urban growth boundaries were drawn to contain high-density development and preserve farmland and the environment.

"Back when Oregon told all its cities to draw their urban growth boundaries sometime in the '70s, Pendleton elected to draw a fairly tight urban growth boundary," Turner said. "And now 40-something years later it's very, very difficult, almost impossible, to make that change."

Although lending has loosened as the country comes out of recession, developers still might not see profit in building affordable housing in Pendleton.

Elaine Anderson of Umpqua Bank said potential homeowners frequently look for property in the $100,000 to $150,000 range, but simply can't find any.

Clearing blight from Pendleton's existing housing has also proven to be a formidable obstacle.

"We have a problem in Pendleton in that you can rent just about anything," Turner said. "We have a lot of out-of-town landlords who don't even know what their properties look like. They don't know if the place needs to be repainted or if they have sacks of tin cans in the front yard. There's not a huge incentive, particularly for absentee landlords, to improve their properties because they can rent them. I really don't know how to tackle that."

There are some bright spots for Pendleton's housing.

Thanks to housing developments like Pendleton Heights, the city estimates 156 new housing units have been added. And Turner identified a group of properties near the city's water treatment plant as a potential site for a new housing development.

Additionally, the city is already taking steps on one set of municipal regulations developers find onerous.

The Pendleton City Council will consider lowering the minimum density at a meeting Tuesday.

It used to be set at one unit per acre in low density residential zones, four units per acre in the medium density zones and eight units per acre in the high density zones. Maximum density levels would remain unchanged. The ordinance would return density numbers to those same standards, which were made more onerous in 2011.

According to the Pendleton Planning Commission, the ambitious population projections a consultant calculated did not come to fruition.

The meeting will be held Tuesday at the council chambers in city hall, 500 S.W. Dorion Avenue.

The housing committee will also reconvene for another meeting, tentatively scheduled for April 1. Turner expects the new housing study to be completed in June.