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Bum raps for Shelton's wood-biomass project

THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Last updated: May 28th, 2010 12:31 AM (PDT)

Green power looks attractive at a distance, sometimes less so close up. A good example is the environmentally benign wind farm that ruins the view when it's built on a nearby ridge.

Another example is the biomass plant now proposed for Shelton. A joint venture of Duke Energy and a French partner, it would cost \$250 million and produce enough electricity for an estimated 40,000 homes. The feedstock would be stumps, branches and other debris from logging operations in the area.

Some Mason County residents – it's not clear how many – oppose the plan. Others welcome the several hundred jobs the project would bring to the economically distressed county.

The NIMBY – “not in my back yard” – syndrome is at work here, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's easy for outsiders to dismiss the concerns of people who'd find themselves living in the shadow of a big new industrial plant. If most citizens in the Shelton area are genuinely up in arms about the project, great weight ought to be given to their feelings.

That said, some of the critics are making dubious claims about the plant's effects.

One complaint is pollution. Burning wood always dumps particulates and other junk into the air. But the Shelton plant will come with emissions controls, and it won't get built if it doesn't meet the air quality standards of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Washington's state regulations.

This has to be an improvement on slash-burning in the open air, which is what's happening already to a lot of the wood that would find its way to the plant.

The deeper argument is about carbon footprints. If the plant is opened, it will dump more than a half-million tons of carbon dioxide into the air per year. But that's looking at the project in isolation. That larger picture includes the slash-burning that would otherwise be avoided and the natural decay of fallen wood, which also releases carbon.

The burning of wood is classified as renewable energy because new trees replace the old and pull the carbon dioxide back out of the atmosphere. This requires a long wait, but it beats the burning of coal and petroleum, whose carbon would otherwise have remained permanently sequestered underground.

These are general observations about biomass power. Whether this or any other plant yields a net benefit depends on a lot of particulars, including how much wood it burns that would otherwise remain intact – in home construction, for example.

Those who don't like the idea of generating power by burning wood may want to think about tweaking Initiative 937. Combined with federal stimulus money, that 2006 law makes this project pencil out by requiring utilities to buy “renewable energy” – including biomass – while not giving them credit for the genuinely renewable hydroelectricity they're already using. A policy that prefers wood incineration to falling water seems environmentally odd, to put it lightly.



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