

Tons of Pollution

Seneca applies to increase its emissions to 17 tons

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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.

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.

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Sometimes all these details collide in unforeseen ways.

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