

The Register-Guard

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ENVIRONMENT

Seneca power plant requests increase in pollution cap

The company's biomass plant has had trouble meeting clean air standards



John Munyon, operations supervisor at Seneca Sustainable Energy, monitors emissions and other systems from the control room of the company's electricity-generating biomass plant on Highway 99 north of

By **Diane Dietz**

The Register-Guard

PUBLISHED: 12:00 A.M., JULY 17

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The owners of a 2½-year-old electricity plant fueled with logging scraps have struggled to meet clean air standards since the facility began operations on the outskirts of Eugene and are asking regulators for a little more leeway to pollute.

Seneca Sustainable Energy, on Highway 99 north of Eugene, has been caught by regulators spouting too much carbon monoxide, too much dark smoke and too much acetaldehyde — in conjunction with the Seneca sawmill next door. Plus, there has been uncertainty about how much fine particulate the plant emits.

In addition, the company ran seven months with its pollution controls for nitrogen oxides switched off, according to regulatory reports.

The mishaps brought Seneca fines of \$2,200, \$2,400 and \$9,600, and more regulatory scrutiny from the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency than most companies would welcome.

Seneca CEO Richard Re said the wood-fired electricity plant is still the cleanest in the nation and the company is working its way through the regulatory issues.

But environmentalists who had opposed the plant when it sought its “minor source” air pollution permit in October 2009 consider Seneca’s request for increased pollution limits a broken promise.

“It was going to be the cleanest biomass energy facility around, and they were doing everything in their power to keep their pollution down,” said Lisa Arkin, executive director of Eugene-based Beyond Toxics. “They weren’t being truthful to the community.”

Seneca secured its initial permit from LRAPA by arguing it would be a minor source for some of the most plentiful pollutants in Lane County’s air. Otherwise, the company would have fallen under the more onerous federal “new source review” requirements of the Clean Air Act.

Now, with Seneca asking for increased pollution limits, LRAPA is embarking on a “new source review.” Eventually, the agency will issue a federal Title V permit to Seneca.

Title V is reserved for plants emitting the most or most dangerous pollution. In Lane County, 19 companies come under Title V, including the Kingsford charcoal plant in Springfield and the Georgia-Pacific chemical plant and Murphy Co. panelboard plant, both in Eugene.

For Seneca, the request to increase pollution limits mean heightened scrutiny from LRAPA, federal regulators and the public. Part of that scrutiny comes tonight with LRAPA holding a public information session about Seneca’s request.

It’s not unusual for companies building new plants to try — like Seneca — to get initially permitted as a minor source, said Dan Galpern, a Eugene attorney with Clean Air Act litigation experience but no involvement with the Seneca permit.

“Polluters often will state that they expect to not be a major source,” he said. “It’s because they may believe it — because they may have overestimated the efficacy of their (pollution) control system. But it’s also true they often are motivated to escape the detailed scrutiny of the Clean Air Act.”

Businesses want to keep emission levels low.

“Any time you can stay under a significant level (of emissions), you’re better off to do that — if you possibly can,” Re said.

Facing new requirements

But to the public, the “new source review” of a proposed plant is important, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The permit is issued before construction starts, so air regulators can ensure that air quality will not be significantly degraded, the federal agency says.

In addition, LRAPA has formally told the EPA that LRAPA will rely on “new source review” as a way to control particulate pollution in Lane County, to prevent particulates from accumulating to the standards-violating unhealthy level. In Lane County, particulate pollution comes largely from burning wood, such as wood-burning stoves in the winter, forest fires in the summer, or the Seneca plant or other industrial sources year-round.

Now that Seneca wants to increase its emissions of particulate matter from 14 tons a year to 17 tons a year, thereby taking it into the 15-ton-plus definition of a major source, it will have to meet a host of new requirements.

The company has to show regulators that it’s using filters, cyclones and other pollution controls for the lowest achievable emission rate. And, the company must buy pollution credits from some other company in Lane County to offset the 17 tons of particulate.

Companies that stay under the major source threshold don’t trigger the need to buy offsets.

“It’s quite an incentive to be just below the threshold,” Galpern said. He added, however, that’s not good for the air. “If you have a lot of companies coming in just under the threshold, that can add up to a great deal of pollution.”

Opponents of Seneca’s wood-burning plant were angered that Seneca wasn’t required by LRAPA to get major source permits from the start.

But LRAPA permit writer Max Hueftle said the agency relied on a guarantee from Wellons, Inc., which made Seneca’s wood-fired boiler, that the emissions would remain below the 15-ton threshold.

When Seneca could not prove it could stay under the threshold for particulate

pollution beginning in spring 2011, the company didn't opt to reduce emissions by burning slightly less wood and generating a little less electricity — which it sells to the Eugene Water & Electric Board.

Instead, the company sought a finer test to prove it complied with some standards, and it proposed raising the limits so it would be sure to stay in compliance in the future.

Fairness questioned

To Arkin, asking for new rules isn't fair.

"The rest of us are responsible for obeying laws. If I see a red light, I have to stop. I can't say, 'Oh I don't want to stop at the red light — can you make all the lights yellow for me?'"

Seneca's proposed new limit for so-called "particulate matter 10," or PM 10, which is particles with a diameter of 10 micrometers or less, is 17 tons a year, up from 14 tons a year.

The permit would also set the aggregate particulate emissions — including the coarser particles such as dust — to 24 tons a year.

Particulate emissions are important, according to the EPA, because they get into the eyes and respiratory system.

Breathing particulate aggravates asthma, bronchitis and other chronic lung diseases, decreases lung function and aggravates heart disease. These mean more emergency room visits, hospital stays and premature death of sensitive people, including the very young and very old, according to the EPA.

But Seneca's Re said the plant in reality emits only the tiniest amounts of particulate, so little that it's nearly impossible to measure accurately.

"It's like the room I'm sitting in, we would be measuring a few bits of particles in the air," he said. "If we tested it 25 times a year, 24 times it would be OK. The way the rules are, if you're off that (one) time, you're off."

The higher pollution limit would give Seneca a "cushion or comfort factor," Hueftle

said.

Seneca's proposal would also increase how much of another pollutant, carbon monoxide, the plant could chug out in an average eight-hour period. The limit is 105.8 pounds an hour on an eight-hour average. In November 2011, the plant briefly exceeded the limit by emitting 121 pounds per hour on an eight-hour average.

An operator was burning wood that was too wet, according to LRAPA. The company quickly made adjustments and pledged better fuel management, reduced output of steam and electricity and installation of an alarm to alert operators to fuel-moisture problems.

Pollution in perspective

The proposed permit would increase the carbon monoxide limit to 149 pounds an hour on an eight-hour average "to better reflect actual operations," according to the permit application.

"If there was an upset condition, if we ever ran into some really wet fuel, we could exceed the eight-hour limit. We raised that number up. But for the month or for annual emission limit, it doesn't increase the total emissions that we can put out," Re said.

All this might sound like a lot of pollution.

But to keep it in perspective, the Seneca power plant contributes about 1 percent of the total "particulate matter 10" emitted by all industrial sources in Lane County, according to LRAPA. As a portion of all PM10 pollution emitted in Lane County — industrial, residential and other — Seneca's emissions amount to 0.6 percent.

Still, that's too much for air activists.

"We're mostly concerned that our airshed is being compromised, which means we're putting an extra burden on the lungs of our children out there in west Eugene," Arkin said.

In the coming months, Seneca will face the significant tasks required of a fully recognized major polluter.

Under LRAPA's pollution trading system, Seneca bought pollution credits that International Paper in Springfield wasn't using because it shut down a machine in the mid-2000s.

Re declined to say how much the company paid for the credits, but he said the cost was not in the millions. "They were not prohibitively expensive," he said.

Seneca was required to buy 17 tons worth of particulate credits to offset the 17 tons of particulate it's now asking to emit. That's a one-to-one offset. But Seneca chose to buy two offsets for every one required.

Why?

"They had access to them and just wanted to make very clear that they were offsetting the emissions sufficiently. (And) it was partly a good will gesture," said Candice Hatch, Seneca's consulting engineer.

LEARN MORE

What: The Lane Regional Air Protection Agency will hold an information session to explain Seneca Sustainable Energy's request for permit changes, mainly raising the amount of air pollution it can emit

When: 6:30 p.m. tonight

Where: Harris Hall, Lane County Public Services Building, 125 E. Eighth Ave.

Information: bit.ly/177Uu03

Comments

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7 comments



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Josh Schlossberg • a day ago

Biomass incineration is one of the filthiest energy "technologies" out there, and whatever it

is, it sure as heck isn't "clean" energy. Learn more at The Biomass Monitor:
<http://www.energyjustice.net/b...>

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Close_to_the_Edge • a day ago

I bet you anything that Kitty Piercy will somehow get involved and make sure the cap is not increased.

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peakchoicedotorg → Close_to_the_Edge • a day ago

Kitty Piercy was a supporter of the incinerator, so don't look for her to do anything to promote public health. She's good at rhetoric but not substance.

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Close_to_the_Edge → peakchoicedotorg • 18 hours ago

I'm all for clean air, but Kitty is unreasonable, a tyrant, and needs to start telling the truth. Remember how she ruined the Civic Stadium buying competition, the parkway, the EmX, the attempt to add a fee on everyone's EWEB bill without a public vote, etc. She goes against the grain. If she could band cars in Eugene, she would. Its amazing how she got re-elected.

^ | v Reply Share ›



peakchoicedotorg → Close_to_the_Edge • 15 hours ago

I'm not a supporter of Mayor Piercy but half of your claims are wrong. The Parkway was dead long before Piercy became Mayor, the Federal Highway Administration (whose project it was) realized they could not legally permit the project. Under Title 23, United States Code, federally funded highways are the jurisdiction of FHWA, not local governments. The money was not there, the highway violated every applicable federal law (it's illegal to build highways through parks using federal funds) and it would have made West 11th traffic worse through increasing the north-south traffic connecting to the Parkway (I've read the traffic analyses). Piercy's mistake was refusing to mention it was a Federal project, not a City decision, which led to confusion.

As for allegedly trying to ban cars, that's ridiculous. She has been a supporter of the Regional Transportation Plan which includes a billion dollars of highway widening, including \$250 million to widen Beltline, a similar amount for widening I-5 and \$200 million to widen Highway 126 in Springfield.

As for the EWEB bill, I'm delighted that "all of Eugene" voted against this proposal.

The Republicans didn't even bother to run someone against her last time, she's a good distraction from the fact the real power at the City of Eugene is the City Manager, an unelected bureaucrat who is totally unaccountable to the citizens.

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Close_to_the_Edge → peakchoicedotorg • 10 hours ago

Ok, fair enough. Under Kitty, Eugene is headed in the wrong direction. In short, Kitty is the one that hired Jon Ruiz to implement her dream plans for Eugene.

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peakchoicedotorg → Close_to_the_Edge • an hour ago

The real estate speculators and timber barons who own Eugene hired Piercy and Ruiz to implement their dream plans.

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