



September 22, 2009

BIOMASS PLANT IDEA FACES OBSTACLES IN LINCOLN COUNTY

By Brad Fuqua

It's not a new idea – a biomass power plant located in Lincoln County.

With all of the tree waste to be found in the region, it seems like a given that there would be plenty of material to sustain a biomass facility. But the issue is not so clear cut.

“God, I wish we could,” said Paul Rumelhart, Kootenai River Development Council executive director. “It would be such a cure for here.”

Indeed, jobs that such a plant could provide would be welcome relief for a county with one of the highest unemployment rates in the state. Creating jobs is one of the points behind Gov. Brian Schweitzer's announcement on Thursday that two Montana energy companies have been awarded \$425,000 in grants to complete biomass energy feasibility studies in the western end of the state.

“Biomass is another tool we can use to build a smarter, cleaner energy future for Montana,” Schweitzer said in a press release. “By harnessing this and other innovative energy ideas, we can help ensure the viability of timber jobs for Montana families and communities and manage forest health.”

Lincoln County is mentioned specifically in the release – which was sent out by the Montana Department of Commerce. Porter Bench Energy has completed an initial review of biomass power generation potential in Lincoln County as well as Flathead County. With the grant, that research will be expanded to include all of western Montana.

Rep. Chas Vincent has been working with the Porter Bench study over the past 10 months.

“The biggest hurdle, of course, is do we have enough feed stock to feed a biomass plant?” Vincent said. “We have enough to feed a couple of them so the question is, can we access it?”

Kootenai National Forest land dominates the Lincoln County landscape. As such, the ability to access supply has been unpredictable.

“(It won't work) unless they can come up with a Forest Plan that will dictate that so many acres are managed each year and off that comes so many tons and it's not appealable and not challengeable,” said Rumelhart, who last year proposed an ethanol plant to be located in Libby. “But until that takes place, unfortunately I just can't see a future in it.”

Vincent said the feasibility study would be looking at innovative ways to access what is available in the forest and elsewhere in the county. The study must be completed within six months.

“At the end of the six months, we're going to be submitting all results back to Commerce,” Vincent said. “The exciting thing right now is with capital investment. The atmosphere is really ripe for renewable energy right now.”

And that's good news for Lincoln County. But again, the big question is accessing forest material to feed the biomass plant.

Rumelhart said other feasibility studies have been completed in the past, including one last year for the Troy area.

"There's no way in heck under the current system that the Forest Service can guarantee sustainable supply for a plant," he said. "We've done other studies in this area on the same thing and it comes down to that."

County commissioner Tony Berget agrees that the biggest hurdle is guaranteeing the availability of materials. But he also said air quality is a concern.

"It's extremely tough for us because we live in this bowl," Berget said. "Troy may be able to pull it off. But these new biomass plants have pretty good scrubbers on them."

Vincent is well-versed on the capabilities of new biomass energy plants. He referred to plants recently built in London and Trinidad and what they've done for those regions. The Trinidad plant even utilizes the heat that is produced with attached tree and banana nurseries.

Fluid-based boilers allow the plants to burn more than just wood fibers. The London plant can incinerate anything carbon-based, including tires.

"The technology has advanced leaps and bounds in just the last four or five years," Vincent said. "We would be looking at flex-fuel biomass plants, which gives us a little bit of flexibility with the feed stock."

Besides Porter Bench Energy, the feasibility study grant money also went to NorthWestern Energy – which will look into constructing up to eight biomass electricity plants throughout its service territory in an area from the Flathead Valley through Missoula, Butte and Big Timber.

Another \$50,000 in grant funds will be used by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation to continue existing biomass programs.

On the Web: <http://commerce.mt.gov/energy/BiomassStudy.asp>.