



The power of biomass: A bold third way for Boardman's future

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Guest Columnist



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By Hiroshi Morihara

As Oregon and America seek our independence from foreign oil, federal regulators are considering new rules that move us in the opposite direction ("EPA dims green luster of biomass," Sept. 16). If approved, these new regulations would throw cold water on local efforts to create new clean-energy sources that would create thousands of jobs in rural communities. I'm talking about turning woody and vegetation biomass into energy.

Biomass is what's created from thinning overgrown and unhealthy forests, waste from sawmills and forest products manufacturing and after-harvest agriculture vegetation. It can even be the woody waste materials left over from home construction and remodeling. Biomass combines the age-old value of thriftiness with new-age innovation to produce renewable energy, more jobs and cleaner air.

Nowhere is this conflict more obvious than with the debate over the timetable of when PGE should close its coal-fired power plant in Boardman. Environmental groups want it closed by 2014; PGE wants until 2020 to operate the facility. But there is a third way: Convert the Boardman plant from coal to biomass and in the process reduce carbon emissions, save ratepayers money and create a new industry in rural communities across our state.

Rather than remain stuck in a stale "close it now or close it later" debate, Oregon needs to take advantage of our many assets to solve the problem and create a win for our environment, our economy and our people. That's the way we used to do things here, and it's time we rediscover this sense of optimism, innovation and destiny.

Today, Oregon has chronic unemployment in rural communities. We also have millions of acres of federal, state and private forest lands that need management and thinning or risk damage from fire and disease. And with the Boardman plant, we have an important source of current and future energy, but at the cost of burning dirty coal imported from other states.

But the Boardman dilemma is also an opportunity. Along with our public and private forest lands, Oregon is home to incredible agriculture lands, existing rail infrastructure and innovative thinkers -- in energy, forest products agriculture and technology -- all of which hold the key to our renewable energy future.

My company, HM3 Energy, is but one example. We've developed a technology that converts biomass into hockey puck-size briquettes that can be burned like coal to create electricity, only more cleanly. Our biomass pucks could replace the coal being burned at Boardman -- without costly changes to the plant -- while creating an in-state market for biomass production. Existing rail lines that feed Boardman and service many current and former sawmill sites across Oregon could connect a dozen or more biomass energy manufacturing facilities with their largest customer.

All of this is possible with the right federal regulation of biomass. Fortunately for Oregon, both Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley have come out against the proposed rule changes and both major-party candidates for governor -- John Kitzhaber and Chris Dudley -- have made biomass development central features of their economic development plans for the state. What this tells us is that Oregon's energy and economic future isn't a partisan issue and need not be dictated by far-away regulators.

Our future is in our own hands, if we choose to seize it.

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