

POLITICO

Sprucing up our energy supply

By: [Rep. Greg Walden](#)

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What's green, grows on trees, creates jobs and supports healthier forests in rural America?

Answer: woody biomass.

If you were enraptured with the cap-and-trade debates in the House Energy and Commerce Committee two years ago, you're likely already familiar with my passion and advocacy for energy produced from woody biomass.

But most of you probably had something better to do.

Woody biomass is the general term for byproducts from forest management projects — limbs, tops, needles, leaves and other scrap waste. After forest restoration projects on federal land, this waste has traditionally been put in piles to rot or be burned.

But this renewable waste can be turned into a source of energy. It's already happening in Oregon and holds great promise for creating jobs in economically depressed portions of the country. It also moves America toward our goal of achieving energy independence.

Now, I'm not one to say there's a silver bullet for getting our country off its addiction to foreign oil, a substantial amount of which comes from regimes that don't like us very much. Nor will the journey to energy independence happen overnight.

But there are a number of technologies that can support good jobs at home and produce the clean energy we'll need for a smarter and more prosperous energy future. Solar, wind, hydro and geothermal are among them. Woody biomass is a renewable resource that deserves to be considered as well.

In my district, for example, a wood-pellet system at the new Harney District Hospital in Burns, Ore., replaced 17,000 gallons of heating oil that cost \$2 per gallon to more than \$4 per gallon in the old hospital. The biomass heating system will pay for itself in less than five years. Remarkably, the waste from this heat source is one garbage can of ash — every two months — that hospital staff take home and use in their gardens.

In Wallowa County, Enterprise High School installed a biomass heating system that could save more than 45,000 gallons of fuel oil a year and is expected to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 1 million pounds, equivalent to removing 67 cars from the road, while saving the school district more than \$1.7 million over 30 years.

During the most recent district work period, I visited the Lakeview community, the site of a number of renewable-energy projects. In November 2010, Iberdrola announced that construction would begin on a 26.8-megawatt biomass cogeneration plant there. The project is expected to produce enough power for 18,000 typical homes by the fall of 2012 and provide as many as 150 to 200 jobs during the construction phase and 50 to 75 jobs once operational.

And that's in a county with a population of less than 8,000 and a 12 percent unemployment rate. According to the Oregon Employment Department, losing 200 jobs in rural eastern Oregon has the same economic effect as losing 26,400 jobs in the Portland metro area. Every single job is precious in these communities, let alone several dozen.

As a nation, we lag far behind global leaders in the use of woody biomass.

In Sweden, biomass has surpassed oil as the top source for energy generation, comprising 32 percent of the country's total energy supply, according to Wood Resource Quarterly. In America, we're at about 3 percent.

According to the International Energy Agency, Sweden has reduced its carbon dioxide output by 9

percent in recent years, while increasing its gross national product by 48 percent. In Sweden, where biomass energy created 30,000 new jobs, the model has worked.

Still, some special interests have worked behind the scenes to lobby against the growth of this proven technology.

They successfully added language to the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 that said, in essence, energy produced from woody biomass from federal land is not “renewable.”

But here’s the catch: Woody material from most state and private land is considered renewable. So, two identical piles of woody debris — one from federal land and one from state or private lands — are viewed completely differently under the law.

This only underscores the all-too-often counterproductive regulation of our national forests. There is bipartisan agreement that our forests are choked and overstocked. Just 10 percent of the annual growth in federal forests located in Oregon is harvested each year. Another 25 percent is lost to mortality. The rest of the growth, if not managed through responsible forest health projects, just serves as fuel for catastrophic wildfires like the current inferno in Arizona.

With the proper tools, professional foresters can manage our forests back into balance with nature, make them more resistant to wildfire and provide better habitat for wildlife. That’s a goal we should all share. According to the National Center for Atmospheric Research, wildfires release about 2.5 tons of mercury into the air annually, more than twice as much as the amount released from power plants and factories.

And the byproduct of these forest health projects — woody biomass — can be a source of job creation that will contribute to economic recovery in rural parts of the country, like eastern Oregon, where the downturn has been felt most acutely.

Finally, woody biomass is a worthy piece of the puzzle that gets us that much closer to a smarter and more independent energy future that’s better insulated from the volatility of energy prices that has become all too familiar in recent years.

It’s good for the forests. It’s good for jobs. And it’s good for energy independence. It’s the kind of win-win-win scenario that public policymakers should crave.

Rep. Greg Walden (R-Ore.) serves on the Energy and Commerce Committee.