

Biomass plant safeguards

Strict standards in place to regulate forest harvesting

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A million tons of wood will be needed to fuel Gainesville's proposed 100-megawatt biomass power plant. Every day, an estimated 130 trucks will deliver 25 tons of wood apiece. That demand could have huge impacts on the area's forests and ecology. A year ago, the Gainesville City Commission selected a company to build a biomass power plant to meet the area's future energy needs. Commissioner Jack Donovan raised his concerns about the forests then.

"The fear was, what happens if we get into over-forestry or over-harvesting," Donovan said. "We wanted to make sure the harvesting would take place in a way that would be sustainable over time. That we wouldn't build ourselves a wood-burning plant and then run out of wood."

Studies conducted by both the University of Florida and American Renewables, the company that will build the power plant in Alachua County, indicate there is more than enough wood resources in the area, said Ed Regan, assistant general manager for strategic planning for Gainesville Regional Utilities. After a year of negotiations with American Renewables - formerly known as Nacogdoches - the city has adopted strict standards regulating wood sources for the plant. The Forest Stewardship plan includes a financial incentive for timber companies using the very best practices in forest harvesting.

"I think that the standards we put into place, that ensure clear cutting will not occur, relieved my concerns," Donovan said.

Biomass - organic material used as fuel, in this case wood - is considered a renewable energy with less harmful emissions than coal or gas. Prices for biomass as fuel are less volatile and aren't dependent on foreign markets. A majority of that wood will come from the waste or shavings left over from timber harvesting operations within about a 75-mile radius of the plant. Only fuel coming from the timber industry is regulated by the new standards. An economic impact study conducted by the Florida Forest Association estimated in 2005 that timber was a \$7.26 billion industry in northeastern Florida and a \$69.2 million industry in Alachua County.

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