

Colorado's first biomass plant begins delivering electricity



BY PAT MACK
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LISTEN Audio: Pat Mack reports on Gypsum biomass plant



Slideshow: The biomass plant in Gypsum, Colo., is ramping up production. It's the first in the state. The plant will generate electricity from burning wood, mostly from beetle-killed trees.

Colorado's first biomass plant will make energy from beetle-killed trees. The \$56 million facility in Gypsum, Colo., begins delivering electricity for the first time today.

While some residents in the small Eagle County town worry about the impact on air quality, supporters hail the plant as a way to boost renewable energy and improve forest health. The biomass facility will burn wood to heat water, and the resulting steam will power a turbine, generating electricity.

Dean Rostrom is with [Eagle Valley Clean Energy](#), the developer of the plant. He says in

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addition to being a source of renewable energy, the facility could reduce the severity of fires by removing some beetle-killed trees from forest land in the area.

"This is a unique tool the forest service is very excited about, because this is a long-term reliable outlet for forest material they need to get out of the forest, whether it be beetle-kill or whether it be cuttings and trimmings for campgrounds and trails and such," Rostrom said.

Rostrom spoke with reporters during a media tour in August but declined a later interview request from CPR.

In addition to trucking in wood from forest land within a 75-mile radius, the plant will rely on wood waste contributed by the Eagle County Landfill.

Electric customer

The plant should generate electricity for 10,000 homes, according to Del Worley, CEO of the utility that will buy the power, [Holy Cross Energy](#). Worley said the plant will help the utility reach the state-required goal of acquiring 20 percent of its energy from renewable sources by 2015.

"Through surveys our customers wanted renewable energy, and they seemed willing to pay a little more for it," Worley said.

Worley adds the technology for biomass hasn't been the problem. Financing, though, has been trickier since bankers have been skittish about providing capital to build them.

"I think the big issue has always been being able to guarantee you have a fuel supply for the amount of time you want to write off the investment," Worley said.

Eagle Valley overcame those concerns in part because of the volume of beetle kill in the state. In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture provided a \$40 million loan guarantee.

Opposition

But some Gypsum residents, like Nicole Shelter, worry about the plant, especially with it being close to two schools. Shelter and her husband have four children. "I just think my children are at risk," she said. "And I think the health of all of my children is at risk."

Derrick Bretta lives next to the plant. He's concerned about what the 250 tons of wood that'll be burned daily will do to air quality, pointing out the [American Lung Association](#) opposes biomass plants.

"You might say, 'Well, you're just being vocal because it's in your backyard.' And there is a real true point to that," Bretta said. "When you do see it in your backyard your eyes open up a lot more than when it's not in your backyard."

Eagle Valley's Rostrom said his company is deploying state-of-the-art filters to scrub all but a tiny fraction of emissions. "We exceed all air permit requirements," he said.

Colorado's Air Pollution Control Division issued a permit for the plant in October 2012.

Gypsum's town manager Jeff Schroll said the location of the biomass facility was not selected because it's near schools but because it fits next to the community's other manufacturer. He expects prevailing winds will carry any emitted smoke away from town, although he's not expecting much of that. He added the filters are expected to remove all but the equivalent of the smoke from one cigarette.

"We would have not been interested in the plant at all if we felt what comes out of that stack isn't going to be heavily monitored and regulated," Schroll said.

Sen. Mark Udall (D-Colorado) is one high-profile supporter. During a tour, he called the biomass plant a win-win-win proposition, boosting renewable energy, improving forest health and creating jobs. The facility will employ about 40 people.

"This is cutting edge," Udall said. "It's pioneering, and we're here to tip our hats to the owners who have invested in it."

He says a handful of other biomass plants are in development in the state.

The one in Gypsum will slowly ramp up with full output expected this spring.

Aspen Public Radio contributed to this story.
