

Biomass or Biomeass? The Politics of Green Energy

Melissa Ryan and Dr. Michael Vorwerk

Liberal Arts and Environmental Science Programs, Westfield State College, Westfield, MA 01086

Introduction

People today understand that renewable energy is a vital resource that needs to be tapped into as our nonrenewable natural resources, such as oil, are depleted. However, several questions are raised: •Is the government more interested in creating new energy plants to help the environment and not concerned enough with where they are putting these plants? (See proposed site map Figure 1 and site photograph Figure 4.)

- What constitutes Biomass? According to the US Department of Energy, biomass "include[s] agricultural and forestry residues, municipal solid wastes, industrial wastes, and terrestrial and aquatic crops grown solely for energy purposes."¹ (See Figures 5 and 6 for examples.) However, this definition can be altered by the city or town of a proposed plant to meet their specifications of what can be burned.
- The research presented here identified the Special Interests involved and explored the political implications of those groups and/or individuals. Interviews were conducted with those holding Special Interests including: Russell Biomass, LLC, Russell Town Government, Massachusetts State Government, Concerned Citizens of Russell, and Citizens for Renewable Energy.
- Primary interests found:
 - monetary gain by Russell Biomass, LLC
 - monetary gain by the Town of Russell,
 - monetary gain by businesses in Russell;
 - a means to meeting the state quota for renewable energy;
 - desire to not increase local pollution
 - desire to not diminish property values

Background

- The state government has created incentives to encourage renewable energy developers
- Russell Biomass, LLC has proposed building a 50MW biomass plant on a current brown field along the Westfield River in Russell
- Seventy to Eighty trucks per day traveling down Russell's Main Street, past 32 homes and businesses
- An alternate route down Frog Hollow Road would alleviate all truck traffic from Main Street, but would affect two homes on the road and create an unsafe intersection on HWY 20.
- Jobs would be created across the state (approximately 20 at the site in Russell)
- Renewable energy would be produced for approximately 150,000 homes
- Town tax revenue would increase by about \$300,000 per year



Figure 1 Map of Proposed Location, The Country Journal, March 31, 2005

Methods

- Interviews were based on individuals or groups that would directly benefit or be harmed
- Interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone and were limited to one-hour per interview
- Interviewees were asked how their organizations were being funded



Figure 2 Proposed Alternate Route
Photo by Alex Trzasko III

Interview with Jana Chicoine, Concerned Citizens of Russell

Grass roots organization whose mission is "dedicated to creating and preserving a quality of life in the Westfield River Valley that promotes and protects our sense of community, the health and well-being of our citizens (especially the vulnerable) and the environment"⁴

Main issues include:

- Truck traffic and pollution
- River capacity and pollution
- Air quality contamination



Figure 3 Picture of Proposed Site
Photo by Alex Trzasko III

BIG PICTURE

As energy prices and environmental awareness increases, natural resources are decreasing. The need for developing renewable energy that is both economical and environmentally safe is clearly evident. While this is a vital need, questions must be raised, and the energy industry held accountable for not just building more plants, but also recognizing the impacts on communities.

Interview with Dwayne Breger, Department of Energy Resources

- Governor: "new economic incentives for large scale energy efficiency initiatives and programs"²
- Boston Globe states that "[t]he law requires that 2.5 percent of the state's power come from renewable sources, a figure that will climb to 4 percent by 2009"³
- Incentive programs have been created with industry in mind to develop and produce cleaner burning energy
- While biomass is not the cleanest form of energy it produces much less pollution than coal or oil
- Biomass plants are beneficial for economic development within the state providing jobs for plant employees, truckers and foresters

Interview with Phil LaBranch, Citizens for Renewable Energy

- Goal is to be an objective source of public education through independent research; holding both proponents and opponents accountable
- Concerned about the environmental effects of the proposed alternate route of Frog Hollow Road (See Figure 2.)
- Created a website to keep the public informed, used the website as a source to open communication through online blogs

Discussion and Analysis

All parties agreed that environmental and health concerns exist and need to be carefully analyzed prior to discussions of construction take place. Concerns included the amount of truck traffic and diesel fuel pollution, river capacity and other river related concerns, and air pollution from the plant that would impact the immediate community and the region.

The Russell Biomass, LLC was granted a Special Permit from the Town of Russell to begin the permitting process, not to build their plant. This process would carefully look at all aspects that would impact the environment, public health, and the community as a whole. If the plant does not meet the designated standards by the government, it will not be built. These agencies are paid through our taxes as professionals working in their field of expertise. Should the proposed plant be approved by all twenty agencies, the plant will be routinely tested to ensure all regulations continue to be adhered to.

Interview with Town of Russell Representative

- Special Permit Approved by Russell Planning Board and filed with Town Clerk on July 12, 2005⁶
- Decision based on combination of information from Tighe & Bond research, negotiations with Russell Biomass, LLC, and after a site visit to a 17 MW biomass plant that is currently in operation
- Town will receive about \$300,000 annually through tax revenue
- Area businesses will see an increase in revenue
- The brown field will be cleaned
- Stipulations were placed on the number of trucks, the amount of idling time allowed, and hours of delivery



Figure 4 Model of Proposed Biomass Plant

Conclusion and Final Remarks

My personal conclusion from the analysis completed includes:
The community has a responsibility to be educated on issues directly involving their homes and families; however there is substantial evidence that most of the opposition involved has turned their own personal issues into "environmental" issues. The bottom line is that the plant will not be built if it does not receive the 20 approvals and permits (which include environmental and health issues) needed from the town, state, and federal government.



Figure 5 Bio-fuel
Photo credit: U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy Network (EREN)



Figure 6 Switchgrass, a hardy plant used in the bio-fuel industry in the United States

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Representative from Town of Russell Planning Board
Alex Trzasko III
Professor Michael Vorwerk
Westfield City Counselor

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3. "Wood-burning plants gain power Concerns voiced on scale, pollution", Naita, Globe Correspondent, August 5, 2006
4. CCR Missions Statement
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