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**[Proposed power plant raises questions about environmental costs](#)
Proponents, however, contend it will provide the area with
much-needed revenue and jobs**

BY [DIANE DIETZ](#)

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Is Seneca Sawmill's proposed \$45 million wood-fueled electrical power plant green, sustainable and urgently needed? Or is it an example of "green washing" an activity that ultimately will pollute the air and deplete forest soils?

Those were the big questions that business boosters and environmental defenders raised about Seneca's plans Thursday night at a meeting held at Red Cross offices in west Eugene and sponsored by the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency.

Seneca proposes to build the plant at its existing operation on Highway 99 north of Eugene. Overall, the 18.8-megawatt plant would emit more than 400 tons of pollutants per year, including carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and hazardous air pollutants, according to Seneca's air permit application.

Of the 30 people who spoke at Thursday's meeting, about half opposed the company's plan. A handful were neutral in their remarks but asked questions about how the plant would be regulated.

"In the summer, we all know there's a brown haze over the valley. This is going to amplify it," activist Mark Rabinowitz said.

But business advocates said the project is both clean and timely. "We should get onto this," Tom Slocum said. "It's a real opportunity."

LRAPA is just beginning its evaluation of Seneca's proposal. The air agency will issue a draft report on the plant in June and seek formal public testimony then.

Seneca officials hope to break ground on the plant by October and bring its wood-fired boilers — that make steam that turns turbines that produce enough electricity for 13,000 households — on line by the end of 2010.

The Eugene Water and Electric Board is strongly considering whether to buy power from the Seneca plant. The utility's board will take up the issue on May 5.

The plant construction cost would be \$45 million, and \$11 million of that would pay for pollution controls, Seneca Project Manager Todd Payne has said.

The state is preparing to give the company a \$10 million Oregon business energy tax credit, according to Lou Torres, spokesman for the state Department of Energy.

Activists on Thursday said they worried about the amount of irritating and poisonous pollutants the plant would emit, even considering all the pollution controls the company plans to install. They fretted about dioxins formed in the burning process and about nitrogen oxides that mix with hydrocarbons in the presence of sunlight to form smog.

The list of hazardous air pollutants the plant will emit is long, Ruth Duemler said. "There's lead — there's a whole page of them — there's arsenic, there's benzene," she said. "They're not good for us. They're hazardous."

Beth Parsons said she understands the lumber industry. "I like wood. I like lumber. That's not the issue. The issue is breathing," she said.

Peter Saranceno of the Many Rivers Group of the Sierra Club said Seneca's current sawmill emissions should be considered along with the addition of the wood-burning plant. "We're open to the possibility of this plant, but we think more monitoring would be best," he said.

John Herberg of the Oregon Toxics Alliance asked LRAPA to require the plant to install stronger pollution control technology. "I know it's expensive," he said, "but if they don't spend it, it's the public that absorbs the cost through higher health care bills."

Samantha Chirillo, who spoke on behalf of Citizens for Public Accountability, advocated for a full cost analysis of Seneca's plans in terms of public health and forest health.

Some who testified worried that the Seneca plant and others built in the future would give incentive to scrape every bit of bark, wood and stick from the forest floor, eventually depleting the soil.

But others said the plants could help the forest by giving companies an incentive for thinning dense, spindly thickets of overplanted trees. It's much worse for the air when those thickets burn in a forest fire or when loggers burn slash without any pollution controls, some said.

Seneca figures it can feed the plant from its own sawmill operations and logging wastes from its 165,000 acres of forest land in Lane and Douglas counties, company officials have said.

The Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce turned out business boosters to speak up for the project. Seneca is a local company and the plant would generate local revenue, they said. It would be hard to find a better-managed company or a better-manicured wood products operation, they said.

The plant fits the city's sustainable business initiative, several supporters said. And it would provide new jobs in a down economy.

When the plant is complete, 11 new employees will be added to Seneca's 250-employee work force. About 90 people will be employed to build the new plant, according to

company estimates.

“They’re undertaking this project just when we need it the most,” said Dave Hauser, chamber president.

“My concern is we will drag this down and stop it from happening,” Mike Tayloe added.

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