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Trees not trash; pellets not 'green'

By Andrew George

"Tug on anything in nature, and you'll find that it is connected to everything else." I was recently reminded of this John Muir quote after reading about a growing and controversial new industry spreading across North Carolina and the entire Southeast: wood pellet manufacturing.

In rural communities such as Ahoskie, Garysburg and Roxboro, this new industry is turning whole trees into tiny wood pellets to be burned in European power plants to produce so-called biomass energy, which is essentially burning wood. The growth of biomass energy and the wood pellet industries is based on the need to find alternatives to coal. In Europe and in many U.S. states, the biomass industry has fooled people into thinking it is a green energy, and large subsidies are given away annually to electric utilities to burn trees from North Carolina and elsewhere. As a result, the demand for wood pellets from our native Southeastern forests is skyrocketing. According to a recent News & Observer article, Europe imported 3 million tons of wood pellets last year, and by 2018 that number is expected to climb rapidly to 30 million.

Point of View

There are some obvious ironies in logging trees, shipping them to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean and burning them in European power stations under the guise of "green energy." In fact, the most recent data show that burning whole trees is worse (per unit of energy) for the environment than burning fossil fuels like coal.

At first, the pellet industry tried to convince us that it was using only "waste" wood – the tops and limbs left over from other logging operations – but there is no way near enough left over residues from clearcutting to feed this industry so now it is finally admitting it is using whole trees.

The Ahoskie facility operator, Enviva, assures North Carolinians that it is using only gnarled and knotted trees – and that no harm is being done to the local ecology as a result of its operation. Recent evidence from the Wall Street Journal, however, shows one of the manufacturer's suppliers clearcutting a wetland forest near the facility. Wetland forests are comprised of ecologically valuable plant species and provide irreplaceable habitat for native wildlife, some of which are endangered. Losing these unprotected forests means losing a part of North Carolina's natural heritage, and these natural areas become more susceptible to destruction as the demand for wood pellets increases.

It's even more alarming that Enviva is acting as if it is doing us and the environment a big favor by using deformed trees on its way to making a fortune. The arrogance with which it describes what it uses is telling. Claiming to be a responsible steward of our forests by accepting only unwanted, blemished trees – trees that can't be manufactured into things like furniture or building materials – wrongfully assumes that trees serve only an economic purpose. There is no "waste" in a functional ecological system.

Moreover, the earth's atmosphere depends on trees to capture carbon, regardless if knotted or gnarled. In fact, in the U.S. we count on our forests to suck up roughly 13 percent of our total, economy-wide greenhouse gas emissions each year. That's like taking more than 180 million cars off the road.

Certainly trees have economic value, but for the wood pellet industry to imply that's all they're good for shows its true priorities: the bottom line.

The emergence of the wood pellet industry has flown under the radar. But as it grows, we must not forget how important our forests are for North Carolina's ecology and everything else connected to it.

Dr. Andrew George is an adjunct lecturer at the UNC-Chapel Hill and the Nicholas School for the Environment at Duke University.