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SENT TO LSU AGCENTER/LOUISIANA FOREST PRODUCTS DEVELOPMENT CENTER - FOREST SECTOR / FORESTY PRODUCTS INTEREST GROUP

How the EU's Green Energy Drive is Hitting US Forests

Derb Carter is a keen bird watcher. It's been his hobby since his childhood and it's now a part of his job too, in his role as a lawyer with the Southern Environmental Law Center. When walking through the low-lying countryside on the banks of the Roanoke River, in North Carolina in the US, he's circumspect about the future of these old forests though. "Someone needs to protect these places and the animals that depend on them," he says. "In addition to birds, we have bears, turkeys, herons, eagles and egrets here." But, the area is now under threat from a growing wood pellet manufacturing industry here, he says. "We've protected some of the land in refuges and state parks," Carter told DW. "But most of it is still privately owned, and that's where the pellet mills will get their wood." A worldwide industry Wood pellet manufacturing is a growing industry in the US. The trend is due to old coal power plants, especially in Europe, being refitted to burn wood pellets to reduce emissions. In Europe, reducing carbon emissions from power plants form part of the bloc's new climate goals for 2030. Supporters argue that the small wood pellets release much less carbon than coal when burned. And, because new trees can be planted when older ones are cut, wood is considered a renewable resource. Enviva is the largest maker of wood pellets in the US. At its Northampton production facility, also in North Carolina, it produces some 500,000 tons of wood pellets a year. According to the company's website, most of this product is shipped straight to Europe. According to Wood Bioenergy magazine, an increase in US wood pellet exports to Europe has been particularly noticeable in the last two years. Company spokesman Elizabeth Woodworth insists Enviva is a green enterprise however, which is looking after the environment and simply putting waste wood to good use. "We use low grade by-products from other lumber industries, like saw dust, wood chips, tops and limbs of trees that otherwise wouldn't have another market," she says.

Enviva claims about 25 percent of its raw material comes from trees that are too small, crooked or diseased to be used as lumber. The company also accepts logs harvested from managed forests. "[Our suppliers] thin out smaller or defective trees out of a forest to ensure that the higher value trees have the sunlight and the nutrients to grow as tall as possible," Woodworth explains. Doubts about sourcing After multiple visits and flights over Enviva mills, the Southern Environmental Law Center accused the company of reliance on whole trees, some of them 80 to 100 years old which have been clear cut from forests in lowland river areas. Lawyer Derb Carter has shared pictures of Enviva's mill sites with officials at the European Union. At the Enviva wood pellet mill in Ahoskie, North Carolina, a steady stream of trucks arrives loaded with thick logs. The company insists though that these are not being cut solely for wood pellets. It's a claim supported by Charlie Becker with neighboring Virginia's Department of Forestry. "Pellets are a lower value product, and if you own something, you want to get the most money out of it," he says. "You wouldn't take high quality wood that could be used for furniture or veneer or building construction, have it ground up and put into a low value product." Rising demand for pellets Derb Carter is concerned about environmental destruction due to the growing wood pellet industry Demand for pellets is rising dramatically worldwide. This, despite the fact that environmentalists are concerned about the particulate matter that wood pellet power stations pollute into the air. Not to mention the carbon



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footprint of bringing the pellets to Europe. "We're cutting forest over here, which requires energy, processing them into pellets, then transporting them to a port," Derb Carter explains. "Then we are putting them on a boat, burning diesel fuel, to haul them all the way across the Atlantic to again transport them to a utility to burn instead of coal." Nevertheless, it seems like this part of the US is pushing ahead with its plans to develop its wood pellet industry. A new port facility in nearby Morehead City, to facilitate with shipping wood pellets to Europe, recently got the green light from authorities. They say the new facility will provide some 150 new jobs in the region.

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