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Bioenergy sector burned up over slash piles

[Frank Peebles](#) / Prince George Citizen

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Forest companies regularly burn slash piles after harvesting a site for lumber and pulp. Bioenergy companies say slash burning is a waste because they could use the waste material to create pellets.

- HANDOUT PHOTO

Smoke plumes are rising from the backcountry all around Prince George. They are the telltale signs of spring in the forest industry, the annual burn-off of wood waste from winter logging, but the bioenergy sector is fuming over this old way of scorching the leftovers.

Every one of those debris piles is burning jobs that Prince George workers could have had, and burning money foreign countries were lined up to invest in the local economy, said John Stirling, president of Pacific Bioenergy (PacBio).

"We want to put it to productive use," said Stirling. "The idea that we don't have to burn things into the airshed, we can mitigate the risk of forest fire, and take that forest residual in as a product we can make use of, products we can sell into Japan where we are offsetting nuclear and coal emissions, what could be better?"

All wood-pellet (also called bioenergy, biomass or biofuel) plants in northern B.C. already sell as much product as they can manufacture, as fast as they can make it.



5 April 2019



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Most of it goes to Asia or Europe where it is used in industrial furnaces or electricity generation facilities to reduce the amount of coal, natural gas, nuclear and the worst of the greenhouse gases pollutants used by factories, mills and communities.

Pacific Bioenergy recently signed the biggest contracts in the history of the fledgling bioenergy sector, a sector that was pioneered out of Prince George. These pacts are for the largest amounts of pellets ever asked for and for the longest duration ever established.

"These new contracts, which extend to 2030 and 2035, represent a major extension to PacBio's existing contracted sale portfolio," said company CEO Don Steele.

"This new business assures the continued strong presence of our Prince George and affiliated manufacturing operations in the dynamic and growing Asian market. This business, in addition to existing contracts in the European and Japanese markets, demonstrates the fulfillment of over 12 years of pioneering market development work in the Asia region."

Why, then, ask company officials, are brush piles burning all around the city when all of that woody debris - considered bush garbage by the lumber industry - is exactly what they need to fulfill these lucrative, long-term contracts?

PacBio's forestry operations supervisor Conor O'Donnell visited a recent slash fire with Liam Parfitt of Freya Logging Inc., a company that works for a lot of the local sawmill companies to cut down trees and get them into the mills for making lumber, the products that sell for the highest amounts of money on the open market.

A stick's throw away was a hulking yellow concoction of steel with a greedy gut and unrelenting teeth. It chews trees, branches, limbs, just about anything organic, into a pile of fine dust. An extended yellow arm conveys the wood dust into the trailers of chip trucks destined for the pellet factories.

O'Donnell said PacBio has about five of these machines grinding up woody junk at any given time, and there are five or six more he knows of in the area working for other biomass companies.

"It'll load a 53-foot chip truck in about 20 minutes," he said, but the participation of lumber companies is so sporadic that "we ran out of fiber this winter. This is about keeping our doors open."

There is a chain of command in the forest and that is what keeps bioenergy companies from automatically capitalizing on the piles of debris littering the local forest after any harvesting operation. Each block of trees is designated to a lumber company. Whatever is left over after the lumber companies are done cutting can sometimes be sent to pulp mills for turning into paper products and that is the second link in the chain of command in forestry. They have long-standing deals with the lumber companies and in the case of Canfor the lumber and the pulp interests are owned together.

That leaves whatever is left to bioenergy companies and, said the PacBio team, it is plenty of material. The term in all these forestry endeavours is fibre. The sawmills need a certain kind of fibre (wood) for



5 April 2019



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lumber, the pulp mills need a certain kind of fiber for their products and the bioenergy companies need a fibre supply as well.

There are two main sources of fiber staring bioenergy companies in the face. One is the residual woody debris left on the ground (some of it is entire logs that just aren't any good for lumber or pulp).

The other is all the dead pine that is largely still standing in the wake of the mountain pine beetle epidemic. Because it wasn't harvested in a timely manner, they are now useless for lumber and not much good for pulp.

Parfitt called these "zombie blocks."

Here's why PacBio and the other pellet companies can only stare at these grey skeletons of trees - entire forests of the stuff.

"There may not be saw-log material in that stand, but there certainly is material - ideal material, actually - for our business," said Stirling but he explained that by provincial legislation, only the lumber company with the charter for that forest is allowed to cut it down and they are only allowed to cut down a set number of trees per year. If they cut down the dead pine, even to give it away to the pellet plants, that leaves them unable to cut down the equivalent amount of trees they need to make lumber.

Furthermore, a lumber company has to pay stumpage (a fee to the taxpayers' bank account in Victoria) on every tree they cut, but the fee is too high if it's only going to sell at pellet rates. Stirling said what's needed is a government policy allowing for biomass harvesting of the otherwise useless timber so that it doesn't count against the associated lumber company's harvesting rights. Also, a stumpage rate has to be implemented by Victoria that charges an amount realistic for pellet sales instead of lumber sales.

There is another hurdle, though and it pertains to the brush piles. The lumber companies are held to rigid treeplanting requirements that gets in the way of bioenergy companies moving in to collect the woody debris.

"Don't give out a contract on December the 10th and say you have to have it done by March 31st," said Parfitt, illustrating a typical scenario. "What if it snows? What if the roads aren't in shape until June? And that is why they (lumber companies) want it to burn, because they don't want to plant it later," as waiting for the right conditions for bioenergy staff and machines to go in and get the piles sets the treeplanting process back.

O'Donnell said, "That's where it's frustrating, because Canfor and Lakeland and all those guys understand that and will make concessions for us to go in there and get their piles. FFT (Forests For Tomorrow, a government program for forest management) and the B.C. government? No."

It might be changing, said Stirling, offering cautious hope despite it being too late for a lot of piles already in flames.



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"Yes, we can," Stirling said about the ability to act quickly to collect the residual wood or to start harvest on the zombie blocks of dead pine. "We have the contractors with the skills and equipment to do that. It does take some support from government.

"The government has some good programs. There's FFT and FES and FCI (Forests For Tomorrow, Forest Enhancement Society and Forest Carbon Initiative), on the face of it, that are there to help, but the right of access (prevents bioenergy companies from getting in on the forest economy). The government is showing desire, there is some intent, but they haven't gotten there yet. I'm optimistic. Coming off a couple of really tough forest fire years, and just after we've turned off beehive burners, why would we continue to slash burn?"

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