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SunHerald

World's largest wood pellet plant planned in Lucedale. Residents, environmental activists at odds

BY MARY PEREZ

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LUCEDALE PELLET PLANT: LOCALS SAY YES, ENVIRONMENTALISTS SAY 'HOLD ON'

A public hearing for a permit to allow a company to build the largest wood pellet plant in the world in George County Mississippi. Many locals say it will bring jobs. Others worry it will bring environmental and health issues. BY **ALYSSA NEWTON**; *LUCEDALE*

Residents of Lucedale who showed up in force to a public hearing Tuesday already made up their minds about the largest wood pellet mill in the country locating in their town.

They wore stickers announcing their position. And they weren't swayed by speakers who came mostly from outside the area, arguing that [while Enviva](#) might be good for the bottom line, it might not be good for the health of the community.

The company proposes building a \$140 million pellet plant in the George County Industrial Park [in Lucedale](#) and a \$60 million shipping terminal in Pascagoula. The state Legislature appropriated more than \$2 million to fix the rail spur between the two.

The pellets will be made mostly from pine trees in and around George County and shipped overseas to supply fuel for power plants in the United Kingdom, Asia and other countries.

Tuesday's meeting was the last step in the review process before the [Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality](#) decides whether to approve the pollution control equipment so the plant can operate within the legal limits of Mississippi. The decision could come as early as the June 11 meeting of the MDEQ review board, which meets the second Tuesday of each month.

Gloria Tatum, a former MDEQ employee, drove to the meeting from Jackson and said the permit proposed is more stringent than the requirements of the federal Environmental Protection Agency.



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'WOOD BASKET IS STRONG'

One of the final speakers Tuesday night led those who came early and packed the meeting room at the George County Administration Building in a chant of "Jobs, jobs, jobs." More people stood in the hallway for the 2 1/2-hour meeting and the crowd spilled out into the parking lot, listening to the comments broadcast to those areas.

"Well over 240 people are here tonight," said Ken Flanagan, communications director for George County, who addressed the argument that the pellet plant would strip the land around Lucedale of its trees.

George County once supplied timber for two saw mills and two paper mills, Flanagan said. "The wood basket is strong."

Much of the timber is on land owned by families who consider the trees another crop like corn and cotton, said state Rep. Manly Barton, R-Hurley. The pellet plant will be in his district. It will be the largest industrial facility in the county and add jobs and tax revenue for the county and school district, he said.

MDEQ will oversee the company and emissions, he said, just as it does Chevron and other industry in South Mississippi. The [Forestry Commission](#) will oversee the timber harvest, he said.

"I trust that they're going to watch this, monitor this and make sure it's done right," he said.

South Mississippi is home to the Longleaf pine, which once covered 90 million acres in the Southeast, but now an estimated 4 million remain after timber and other industries decimated the forests. The forestry industry today prefers quicker-growing loblolly pines, says the U.S. Forest & Wildlife Service, which has a goal of restoring [8 million Longleaf acres by 2025](#). The Department of Agriculture provides [money and assistance](#) to private landowners to grow Longleaf pines.

Enviva says the pellets will be made "mostly with softwood and some hardwood from both in-woods and secondary sources such as sawmill residue."

"Most of our sourcing won't be from Longleaf trees or forests, but thanks to our collaboration with partners in the longleaf restoration effort, we are confident and pleased that a significant and growing share of the sourcing for our Lucedale plant will support Longleaf forest restoration," read a joint statement by Enviva and Robert Abernethy, president of [The Longleaf Alliance](#).



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OUTSIDE INFLUENCE

Most of the comments came from local residents, business owners and loggers who all said they want the pellet plant and its economic benefits.

The meeting also attracted environmentalists and people from Mississippi and other states who questioned if the 90 direct jobs the plant will create is enough for up to [\\$17 million in incentives](#), grants and property tax breaks the company could receive from taxpayers.

Enviva says combined, the plant in Lucedale and new port terminal in Pascagoula will create [120 full-time jobs](#) in addition to 300 indirect jobs in timber in transportation and 450 construction jobs over the next 12-18 months.

Patrick Anderson, an attorney with the [Environmental Integrity Project](#), said Enviva has a track record of complaints about “fugitive dust” at the Amory plant it operates in Monroe County, Mississippi, and this pellet plant in Lucedale will be even larger.

“It will be the largest plant in the world,” he said. The pollution control equipment the company is proposing is what will get it just within the legal limits, he said. Under the proposal, the company will be allowed up to 150 hours of “bypass operations,” he said, when formaldehyde and other chemicals can escape into the local environment, possibly increasing cancer rates.

Those who spoke against the plant said the locals at the meeting told them they should go home. But Katherine Egland with the NAACP said while residents object to people coming into the state telling them what to do with their trees, they have no problem shipping valuable natural resources abroad or giving millions of dollars in tax incentives to a South Carolina-based company. She suggested the money would be better spent going directly to the timber growers to protect the trees.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

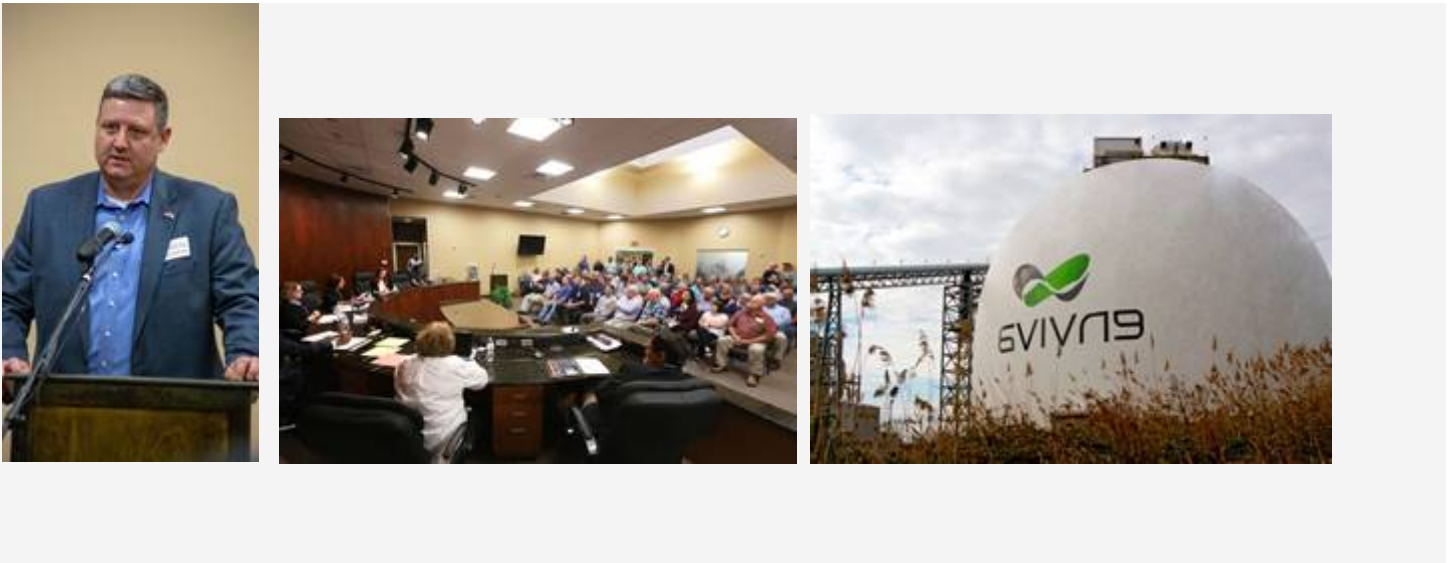
Lucedale was formed on the timber industry and the pellet plant fits the community, said Supervisor Henry Cochran. He lives in the community and said if he thought this company will pollute George County, he would be the first to pull the plug.

The supervisors made independent trips to a pellet plant in Florida and another in North Carolina — paid for by the county, said Supervisor Supervisor Fred Croom.

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“All the questions have been answered,” he said. The plant will be in his district, he said, and he will watch to make sure the promises made by the company are kept.

“I’m already watching,” he said.



There was standing room only at a public hearing in Lucedale Tuesday, May 14, 2019, for a proposed wood pellet plant environmental permit in George County. If approved, the Enviva pellet plant would be the largest in the nation. ALYSSA NEWTON ANEWTON@SUNHERALD.COM

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