

Perspective

Letters ■ Editorials ■ Commentaries

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The Rutland Herald

B6

'Heat Local' makes good sense

The economic and environmental costs of burning fossil fuels to heat our homes and commercial buildings are spiraling out of control. Even as our pocket-books suffer from eye-popping prices, we continue to pour carbon into the atmosphere, causing climate shifts that may well have caused Tropical Storm Irene and this winter's lack of snow at Vermont's ski areas.

In Poultney, we're developing some creative solutions to these challenges.

I like to think of it as our own local energy movement, on par with the local food movement so much in evidence at our farmers' markets and high-quality restaurants. Instead of a bumper sticker that says "Eat Local," think "Heat Local." The energy supply is wood and our home-grown OPEC alternative comprises a consortium of landowners, foresters, loggers and mill owners.

On Earth Day in 2010, Green Mountain College joined dozens of other Vermont colleges, schools, and public buildings that burn wood chips to generate heat by inaugurating its \$5.8 million wood biomass plant. This clean-burning, state-of-the-art plant reduces greenhouse emissions providing heat and electrical power to multiple buildings spread across our picturesque campus. The fuel: 5,000 tons of hardwood wood chips, what Ken Gagnon of Gagnon Lumber in Pittsford likes to call "fuel chips."

But we wanted to go further by working to supply our fuel chips locally, ensuring that the wood was sustainably harvested with minimal damage to for-

est ecosystems. The result is the Poultney Woodshed Project.

Working closely with Rutland's county forester, faculty members and students at Green Mountain College and the Hubbard Brook Research Foundation, and with financial support from the Rutland Regional Planning Commission, High Meadows Fund, and Riverledge Foundation, the Poultney Woodshed Project set these objectives: 1) develop detailed maps of the biomass

resources in the area surrounding Poultney; 2) engage local stakeholders, especially loggers, foresters, and landowners; 3) define "sustainable" and "local" in ways that would allow the project to proceed in a timely manner; and 4) use the financial muscle of the college to create a real market for wood chips.

At Gagnon Lumber, the results of the Poultney Woodshed Project are piling up: a huge collection of logs destined to be burned for fuel 17 miles down the road in Poultney. Logs are harvested from land within Rutland County that is registered in Vermont's highly regarded Use Value Appraisal Program. That means that forest management plans approved by the Rutland County forester are in force, thus assuring thoughtful use of forest resources in return for abatement of local property taxes. Forest management plans are updated every 10 years.

We realize that our program is only a first step. Over time we hope to ratchet up the harvesting guidelines for fuel chips, providing additional protections to wildlife and ecologically significant

Paul
Fonteyn
Commentary



PROVIDED PHOTO

Wood chips are being emptied into the chip bin at Green Mountain College in Poultney.

See Heat, Page B8

B8

The Times Argus

Persp

Heat

Continued from Page B6

landscapes. While our initial efforts focus on land parcels in Rutland County, we expect someday to expand the project to neighboring counties, building markets there while encouraging landowners to adapt sustainable forestry practices.

We are concerned that new wood-powered bio-

mass power plants — including the one planned for Fair Haven by Beaver Wood Energy LLC — could greatly impact local forests. Green Mountain College uses 5,000 tons of wood chips per year; Middlebury College uses 20,000 tons. The new plant in Fair Haven would use more than 300,000 tons. Where will that wood originate? How will it be harvested? How will the local wood products economy be affected? We

need to know the answers to these questions.

The chief lesson from the Poultney Woodshed Project is that our communities can control our own energy futures — our own destinies. We can see our fuel source now, rolling across the Green Mountains to the horizon. And if we're smart about it, it can be an endless supply.

Paul Fonteyn is president of Green Mountain College in Poultney.