

Western foresters: Using wood for heat can help forests

Kansas

Somewhere between preventing forest fires and promoting wood fires, the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition is walking a fine line.

"It's like supporting being 'green,' while also supporting ample energy supplies. You have to be careful, or one of your feet will trip over the other," said Bob Atchison, rural forestry coordinator with the Kansas Forest Service.

The WFLC is a partnership of state and federal government leaders, he said. Its forester members are spread out from Kansas to the American-affiliated Pacific islands.

The group's most recent report suggests why belonging is increasingly a balancing act, Atchison said. That report is coming from dedicated foresters. Its title is "From Wood Waste to Renewable Energy."

Atchison added, however, that three factors make the report's proposals workable:

The 2008 farm bill includes opportunities for wood-to-energy programs. If funded, these provisions would probably lead to expanded wood-heating efforts, such as Fuels for Schools.

"In a way, the president has added his support, too," Atchison said. "He's set a national goal for the United States to achieve an annual output of 35 billion 'gallons' in renewable and alternative fuels by 2017.

"As currently defined, however, woody biomass from our national forests can't count in meeting that goal. That could be a problem."

Wildfires in the west release millions of tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere almost every year. In contrast, today's modern biomass (wood waste) systems are clean-burning.

"In a separate survey, the WFLC found that most western states have already tried the idea of again using wood fuel for heat - with related cost savings of \$7,500 to \$1 million per year," Atchison said. "What's needed now is to take the idea beyond the government pilot-project stage, but do so in a way that also helps to prevent wildfires, to promote healthier watersheds and forests, and to create jobs."

In the western United States alone, more than 80 million acres of forest are now overcrowded and basically unhealthy. This puts them at high risk for the kind of wildfire that can not only level woodlands but also damage people, property, wildlife habitats, watersheds and recreation areas.

"Turning those forests' wood waste into a renewable energy source could really reduce their fire risk," the forester said. "If nothing else, just removing the dead and

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lower quality trees and the undesirable plant species would accomplish a lot."

Overstocked forests tend to develop lots of small-diameter trees, Atchison explained. Competition for light, water and soil nutrients is high. So, the trees tend to have underdeveloped crowns, poor tree form and stunted growth.

In turn, the bottom-line results of such overcrowding are high tree mortality, low-quality timber, few to no understory plants, and little to no natural tree regeneration. Even the forest's soil-level organic layer is underdeveloped. Climbing vines, on the other hand, can sometimes do so well that they out-compete (shade) and eventually kill trees.

"This combination reduces everything from how much wildlife food is available to how well the forest filters out pollutants before any rainwater runoff gets to nearby rivers and streams," Atchison said. "At the same time, the mix can support wildfires that are so intense that they measurably affect our air and thus our global climate."

The summary of "From Wood Waste to Renewable Energy" is available on the Web at www.wflcweb.org/infomaterials/reports.php. More information about Kansas trees and woodlands is at www.kansasforests.org/ and on the Kansas State University Research and Extension website at www.oznet.ksu.edu/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=24.

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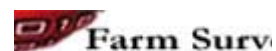
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