

April 28, 2023

By LEN VANDERSTAR and MICHELLE CONNOLLY

Wood pellet companies state consistently that the raw material they use is the unwanted wood waste left behind at logging sites, wood that is typically burned each fall in tens of thousands of deliberately set fires known as slash burns.

Tiny particles by the billions are carried in that smoke and when breathed in can cause serious and at times life-threatening heart and lung ailments, a medical fact stated by health professionals in response to a proposal by a wood pellet proponent to locate a new pellet mill in the community of Smithers, where air quality can be terrible during slash-burning operations.

The proposal, made in 2015, by an existing particle board manufacturer called NewPro, included repeat references to how, if built, the pellet mill would help bring an end to much of that slash burning. Instead, of the slash being burned at logging sites, it would be ground up in the bush and trucked to town instead to make pellets.

NewPro would go on to receive an amendment to a permit it held that paved the way for the pellet mill being built in the community. The approval was unanimously endorsed by Smithers' town council, among others, largely on the basis that it would result in cleaner air.

But from the moment the pellet mill opened in 2018, whole logs, not logging slash, were one of the mill's primary raw material supplies along with woodchips and sawdust from the sawmill next door.

Meanwhile, the slash was burned as before, fouling Smithers' airshed with harmful particulate matter.

We think NewPro's smoke-and-mirrors proposal and the amended permit it received from the Ministry of Environment in response to that proposal should be investigated.

We have asked George Heyman, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, to suspend the amended permit and to require the companies that now run the pellet operation – the Drax Group, owner of the world's largest wood-fired thermal electricity plant, and lumber producer and sawmill operator, West Fraser Timber - to fully disclose exactly how many whole logs are being consumed at the pellet mill each year. The companies should also be compelled to disclose how much "slash" and sawmill residuals feed the mill as well, and how many slash fires were not burned as a direct result of mill operations.

Lastly, we want the government to amend the Environmental Management Act to make it clear that permits obtained based on statements that are later proven to be false or misleading may result in permits being revoked.

As more and more logs are transported to pellet mills, more primary forest must be cleared. And as more forest is cleared and more slash fires are lit, it's human health, biological diversity and climate that pays the price.

- *Len Vanderstar is a biologist, former provincial government employee and director of Bulkley Clean Air Now.*
- *Michelle Connolly is director of Conservation North.*