

April 28, 2023

## **Groups call on Province to suspend pellet mill permit: company misled public and government about improved air quality**

The provincial government should suspend a permit given to a company making wood pellets in Smithers because the company misled both the government and the general public about key aspects of the mill's future operations.

In a letter today to Environment Minister George Heyman, two organizations say that the pellet mill proponent, NewPro, told the BC government, Smithers town council and the general public that the mill would help to substantially reduce "slash burning" in the Smithers area. NewPro applied for a permit amendment under the Environmental Management Act for a conversion from a particle board plant to a wood pellet mill based on particulate matter emissions.

Every year in the Bulkley-Nechako airshed, thousands of slash piles – the woody debris left behind at logging operations – are deliberately set on fire, filling the Bulkley Valley with smoke containing fine particulate matter that can cause serious lung and heart ailments.

NewPro claimed that the pellet mill plan would dramatically reduce the smoke associated with slash burning because the mill would use much of the slash as material to make wood pellets.

In one presentation it claimed that it would take the slash from 1,200 such piles each year and turn the wood waste into pellets. The company explicitly said in a public presentation that this would "help reduce debris burning . . . the largest contributor" to air pollution in the valley.

The BC government subsequently issued NewPro an amended permit under the provincial *Environmental Management Act*, paving the way for the pellet mill to be built. But no apparent reductions in slash burning resulted after the pellet mill opened late in 2018.

"We are extremely concerned at what has unfolded. Despite the company's assertions, the slash burning continues and our airshed continues to be choked with smoke for months on end. Instead of chewing through slash, the local pellet mill is chewing through whole logs," says Len Vanderstar, co-founder of Bulkley Valley Clean Air Now.

Bulkley Valley Clean Air Now along with Conservation North have asked the government to suspend the pellet mill's permit. Vanderstar notes that the pellet mill yard is stacked full of whole logs that are generally considered to be pulp wood or Grade 4 logs. "Such logs have never been considered to be 'logging slash' before," Vanderstar says.

The organizations say that upon suspension of the permit, the government should require the pellet mill's current owner – the United Kingdom's Drax Group - to fully disclose exactly how

many logs and actual logging slash it uses at its Smithers facility and to clearly show how many slash piles have not been burned as a direct result of its operations.

“We also want to see the *Environmental Management Act* amended so that it is clear that permits will be cancelled outright if companies make misleading claims in support of their applications,” Vanderstar says.

“We are losing on so many fronts, not just with this pellet mill but others in BC. Contrary to claims that they use ‘residual’ wood including logging slash and sawmill waste, pellet makers like Drax use hundreds of thousands of logs per year. Those logs all come from BC’s rapidly disappearing primary forests, which partly explains why we are in the ecological crisis we are,” says Conservation North Director, Michelle Connolly.

The BC government’s own data shows clearly that large quantities of whole logs are turned directly into wood pellets at the Smithers’ mill, along with pellet mills in Burns Lake, Houston and Quesnel.

After receiving the amended permit, NewPro sold its Smithers particle board plant to Pinnacle Renewable Energy and local sawmill owner, West Fraser. The pellet mill, which opened in 2018, became the newest of a number of such mills owned by Pinnacle in BC’s interior region.

Pinnacle was later purchased by Drax. Drax operates the largest single-point source of wood pellet consumption in the world, a giant thermal electricity plant in North Yorkshire England, where wood pellets are burned to generate steam that then spins the facility’s turbines.

Drax holds a clear monopoly in BC. It owns or co-owns seven of BC’s 12 pellet mills, which account for about two thirds of all of the province’s wood pellet production.

Last fall, investigative documentaries by CBC’s Fifth Estate and BBC’s Panorama both chronicled the large volume of whole logs being run through Drax’s BC pellet operations and also noted the large piles of slash that continued to be left behind at logging operations and burned.

“Clearly, the Smithers pellet mill has not contributed to a dramatic reduction in slash-burning in our airshed. Unfortunately, slash-burning continues to be the single-worst source of air pollution in our valley,” Vanderstar says.

For more information . . .

Len Vanderstar, Director – BV Clean Air Now  
lvanderstar1761@citywest.ca  
250-917-9049 (mobile)

Michelle Connolly, Conservation North  
Michelle.Connolly@alumni.unbc.ca  
(778) 349-3667 (mobile)