

Michigan Bioenergy: Small Efforts, Large Impact

With the chilly months in full swing, an overlooked luxury during the hustle and bustle is warmth. More specifically, the power that heats houses, businesses, churches, and schools. I had the opportunity to talk with professionals in the bioenergy industry and travel the state visiting two independent power producers. During my visit I was able to learn about the benefits they provide not only locally, but statewide, cleaning up our forests, and creating jobs.

Before I set off on my trip, I talked with Kevin O'Connell, Michigan CAT Electric Power Generation Commercial Business Manager, to learn about the powerhouses that create bioenergy. O'Connell put it into perspective for me with his explanation: "Biogas and bioenergy is really simple when you consider it at its most basic level. When organic waste rots or begins to biodegrade it releases some level of natural gas/methane. When this waste is put into a landfill or anaerobic digester, this gas is captured and put to beneficial use. This gas can be used to run generators, boilers, or even treated and put into the natural gas pipeline which brings natural gas into your house for your furnace, gas range, or clothes dryer."

With that in mind, I was ready to experience the phenomenon firsthand.

The first stop on my tour was Viking Energy of McBain, located in Missaukee County near Cadillac, MI. On this tour, I was joined by State Representatives Triston Cole (R-Mancelona) and Daire Rendon (R-Lake City). Viking Energy is a biomass facility that takes in local wood fibers, burning them to produce energy. Plant Manager Tom Vine shared with me that this biomass facility not only sustains 26 full-time career jobs, but supports hundreds of jobs in other industries throughout the state, from lumber to transportation and fuel handling. Vine's main push was the importance of waste management. "What you need to understand is where your waste is going. If you don't have a home for the waste, then you can't do anything anymore," he repeatedly emphasized.

Biomass facilities can benefit the community by taking in residual waste. It is not uncommon for a biomass facility to have multiple contracts with sawmills, lumber yards, pallet companies, and businesses that chip tires to create what is called a Tire Derived Fuel (TDF). TDF is unique because it enhances efficiency of the waste-to-energy production when combined with lumber by emitting less sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide into the atmosphere due to its high BTU, the temperature at which it burns. When the state cleans up our forests, the debris needs a place to go. For this reason, Rep. Rendon insists, "We need to keep our biomass plants, we can't let them go away. This is necessary to our survival." At the McBain location alone they burn roughly 35 tons of TDF per day. Although 35 tons seems like a lot, it is only 3-10% of the total fuel used.

My second stop was in Lincoln, MI, a small town in northern lower Michigan near Alpena where I was joined by State Representative Sue Allor (R-Wolverine). The Viking Energy plant in Lincoln employs 20 full-time workers and invests \$200-300 thousand locally per year. This does not include payroll, property tax, and other expenses.

The plant manager, Neil Taratuta said that they have a contract with a company in Flint, MI for their chipped tires, which shows the important role these facilities play in waste management. The plant's economic impact is significant too. Payroll alone funds over \$1 million in wages annually. The plant is eminent in Alcona County because it is by far the largest taxpayer, redistributing wealth throughout the community. While in our meeting, Representative Cole pointed out, "An economically strong community is an environmentally strong community. If people are doing well economically then they will do the right thing. If these plants go away, these jobs go away, you're going to have an environmental disaster. Not to mention the families will leave."

I was also able to speak with Gary Melow, Michigan Biomass Director. Melow reinforced Rep. Cole's statement, saying that a common misconception about bioenergy is that folks oftentimes dismiss it as renewable energy or are uneducated on the topic. He works directly with legislators in Lansing, advocating for the biomass industry.

What I learned while touring the Viking Energy plants aligns with Melow's statement. The legislators, plant managers, and advocates I engaged with in the industry recognize the fact that a significant number of individuals and state elected officials are unaware of the benefits the biomass facilities provide to the state. These facilities provide life sustaining jobs to small communities. Often affecting everyday life for thousands of people. These facilities are essential to our state's success and deserve recognition for the energy they feed into our grid. They play an important role they play in keeping our forests healthy and managing waste that would otherwise be difficult to dispose of.

Emily Pallarito is a student at Michigan State University. She is double majoring in community governance and advocacy and public policy. She also serves as the president of MSU Students for Life.