

Europe's appetite for wood is clashing with Black communities in South Carolina

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Europe's effort to make energy from American wood pellets is drawing complaints from Black community leaders in South Carolina, where manufacturers are expanding to produce more of the tiny wood chips.

In Greenwood County, one large [wood](#) pellet factory is increasing the size of its operation and another mill is on the drawing board. A third pellet mill, backed by local and state politicians, plans to open next summer in Florence County.

South Carolina has at least six wood pellet plants that have either been established or proposed in recent years, according to [environmental groups](#) and state regulators.

The Rev. Leo Woodberry and some other African American leaders say Europe's desire for wood pellets is coming at the expense of South Carolina's natural resources and disadvantaged communities.

Pellet mills grind up limbs, stumps and, in some cases, whole trees to make small chips that fuel wood-burning [power plants](#) overseas. In the process, they release [air pollution](#), often after locating near African American communities that are particularly vulnerable to contaminants from the plants, some researchers have found.

"The markets for wood pellets are in Europe and in Asia, and here we have our forests, our natural surroundings being exploited," Woodberry said, noting during an online community forum earlier this month that

natural resources are "just being eliminated and increasing risk for people."

Woodberry, who works on environmental justice issues for the non-profit New Alpha Community Development Corp., said Black populations often are disproportionately affected by air pollution from wood pellet plants.

African Americans, for instance, suffer more respiratory problems than others, making the rise of pellet plants an issue that should not be ignored, said Florence Anoruo, an environmental scientist at S.C. State University.

She and Woodberry spoke during an online community meeting earlier this month about a proposed wood pellet plant in the Effingham community of rural Florence County.

Announced last summer, the \$5.4 million plant would be built in a county with a higher percentage of African Americans than most South Carolina counties. A construction permit application is under review by state regulators.

This comes as President Joe Biden's administration is placing increasing emphasis on environmental justice issues across the country.

Industries that release air and water pollution often are accused of locating in poor, disadvantaged communities that have trouble stopping them. In recent years, critics have taken aim at wood pellet mills in the Carolinas and other southern states.

Across the Southeast, nearly two dozen wood pellet plants have popped up in the past decade, The New York Times reported recently. The industry has increasingly moved into the South because state and local

leaders are accommodating and the region has a thriving forest products industry.

Contaminants released from wood pellet plants include hazardous air pollutants, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide and fine grained soot, all with health implications. Tiny soot particles, for instance, can lodge in people's lungs and make breathing difficult.

The Southern Environmental Law Center lists a half-dozen wood pellet plants that have either opened or are proposed for South Carolina. But there may be more.

Those include an operating plant just inland from Hilton Head Island that, according to the Island Packet, agreed earlier this year to pay \$15,000 in fines for breaking air pollution laws.

Another plant is proposed for the community of Ninety Six, in the same county as the expanding Greenwood pellet plant in northwest South Carolina.

A DHEC official acknowledged recently that the Ninety Six proposal will be soon put on public notice. The request from U.S. Biomass now is under review, DHEC spokesman Derrek Asberry said. The mill needs DHEC pollution permits to open.

An official with the proposed mill could not be reached this week, but he told Greenwood County officials last year that the facility would not have emissions or make much noise. A permit application to state regulators indicates the facility would be a moderate-sized pellet mill, which would produce material for "pellet-fired wood stoves and similar equipment."

Carolina pellets

Some studies show that, while not all wood pellet plants are in communities of color, many of them are.

Of 32 Southeastern pellet production facilities, 18 were located in environmental justice communities., generally described as areas with high poverty and high non-white populations, a 2018 study concluded.

In North Carolina and South Carolina, every wood pellet mill is located in a disadvantaged community, many of them non-white, according to the study from the Dogwood Alliance, a regional organization that promotes forest protection, and a Tufts University researcher.

The pellet plant that is expanding in Greenwood, operated by Enviva, lies in a community of color, the alliance said.

More than half of the people who live within a mile of the plant are non-white and about 75 percent are low-income, according to data the group pulled from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's environmental justice screening tool.

Enviva did not open the Greenwood pellet mill, acquiring it from Columbo Energy in February 2018.

The company questioned the Dogwood Alliance report, saying the environmental group has been a leading critic of the pellet industry. Enviva said it makes decisions on where to site pellet mills based on a variety of factors, including access to wood fiber, the availability of local labor, a state's regulatory structure and access to ports.

"Enviva is committed to sustainability and environmental compliance throughout our operations, and minimizing the impact of our business on the local communities where we operate is essential to that commitment," the company said in an email.

Boosters of the wood pellet industry say the plants help the economy.

S.C. Gov. Henry McMaster and officials in Florence County have praised the proposal to open a pellet plant in Effingham. The \$5.4 million plant would be a division of the Charles Ingram Lumber Co., an established Florence County business.

"We are proud to celebrate Effingham Pellets LLC's investment in South Carolina and our people," the governor said. "Anytime a company is able to set up shop here, it proves what we already know—that we have one of the most competitive business environments in the world and a workforce that can get the job done."

A company official could not be reached this week. But in announcing the expansion last year, Effingham Pellets LLC said it is anxious to crank up the plant.

"We are excited to begin operations in Florence County, where we will be able to produce power solutions that promote sustainability on an international scale," the company said in a news release from the S.C. Department of Commerce. "Effingham Pellets, LLC looks forward to being an important partner to Charles Ingram Lumber Company and the community as a whole."

Opening the Effingham facility would add to an industry that is having a multi-billion dollar impact on the southeastern economy, supporters say.

A recent study by a consultant Enviva retained said the company's total economic impact in the Southeast will be at least \$2.7 billion annually after current expansion and construction projects are completed. The company says it supports 4,200 jobs and pays above average wages.

The pellet plant expansion in Greenwood will provide an economic

impact of about \$210 million, a company spokesman said. As of 2022, Enviva will have pumped more than \$157 million into the Greenwood plant, company spokesman Jacob Westfall said. Enviva says each direct job supports 3.36 jobs in other businesses.

U.S. Biomass Magazine reports the Greenwood plant is one of the largest in the Southeast.

Despite support in South Carolina, wood pellet plants sometimes produce few jobs.

The proposed Effingham facility McMaster praised is expected to create 10 jobs, according to the S.C. Department of Commerce. Production is anticipated to start in June 2021.

"Ten jobs for our local economy," said Pee Dee area minority health activist Buquilla Ervin-Cannon during the online forum. "What is at risk for 10 jobs?"

The proposed Ninety Six facility would create about 30 jobs in its first year of operation, Greenwood County officials were told last year.

European demand

Environmental justice issues over pellet mills are emerging in the South as Europe seeks wood to burn in biomass energy plants. Countries there have sought to switch from coal, a major source of greenhouse gas pollution, to alternate forms of energy as a way to meet climate goals.

Countries like Germany and Sweden produce wood pellets for biomass plants. But Europe also needs American wood to feed biomass plants.

A report last year in Biomass Magazine said the U.S. was the top

supplier of wood pellets to the European Union in 2019, providing nearly 6.8 million metric tons. In 2016, virtually all of the wood pellets exported to the European Union came from southern U.S. ports, according to the 2018 Dogwood Alliance study.

Critics say that unlike solar or wind energy, burning wood won't slow global warming because biomass [plants](#) still release carbon dioxide that contributes to climate change—while taking away trees that help soak up carbon dioxide.

Wood pellets "are being burned in power stations in Europe under the guise of renewable energy," Dogwood Alliance director Danna Smith said. "This is a classic example of where people didn't really think about what the impact of decision-making was going to be on the ground."

Not only does the European demand put American communities at increasing health risk, critics say, but wood pellet production could deplete southern forests and cause more flooding by taking away trees that soak up floodwater as storms increasingly pound the South.

Pellet mill and forest products officials say they primarily seek to burn waste wood, not healthy trees, to make wood pellets. But environmental groups say they have found evidence whole trees also are burned. The New York Times reported similar findings in a story earlier this year.

Enviva's Greenwood plant is a prime example of the debate over pellet mills. Hundreds of people weighed in on the expansion plan last year, including boosters and opponents, the Greenwood Index Journal reported.

The expansion was expected to upgrade pollution controls that were lacking until Eviva acquired the facility from its previous owner in 2018. So far, air tests show pollution levels are within legal limits, according to

Enviva.

Even so, Woodberry and others say increased production means more threats from polluted air. He called for an environmental justice study before a permit decision was made.

Woodberry, who led a caravan of cars through Columbia last year to protest the plant expansion, said in a letter that the community faces danger from a bigger Enviva plant.

"Breathing is something that is not optional, so communities should not have to suffer sleeplessness, nausea, anxiety or depression, vomiting, confusion, impaired vision or disorientation just to name a few of the side effects that they may suffer," Woodberry wrote last year.

In late 2020, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control approved an air pollution permit allowing the plant to expand., a decision that means a 25 percent increase in production, the agency said. Construction started earlier this year, the agency said.

Last year's dustup, and complaints this year about the proposed Effingham plant, are not the first in South Carolina.

In 2016, an international energy corporation backed away from plans to build a big pellet mill in Fairfield County north of Columbia. A local business group acquired the land where Abengoa Inc., a Spanish company, had planned to put the wood plant. Neighbors said a wood pellet plant was not suited for their community.

Juliana Smith, a South Carolina Coastal Conservation League organizer who was critical of the Jasper pellet mill, said the state needs to remain vigilant.

"Often these types of factories are in rural areas, where they draw less attention and try to pollute with impunity, with disproportionate impacts on Black and Brown communities," she said in an email. "That isn't right."

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