



George County wood pellets plant creates markets for state's timber

By: Sid Salter Syndicated columnist
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STARKVILLE – How big an impact does forestry make on Mississippi's economy? For the last six years, the Mississippi State University Extension Service says that forestry contributed more than a billion dollars annually with an estimated value of \$1.2 billion in 2018 alone.

Behind poultry, forestry remains the state's No. 2 agricultural commodity. When final figures were tallied in early 2019, the numbers were closer to the \$1.3 billion the industry generated in 2017.

What does Enviva have to do with Mississippi's strong timber industry? Plenty, it seems.

Enviva has produced dueling op-ed columns on the subject of the whether construction of a \$140 million wood pellet energy facility in George County with a \$60 million ship-loading terminal in Jackson County that would initially produce about 100 new jobs and create new diverse markets for Mississippi timber producers is in fact sound public and environmental policy.

On one side is Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson, who argued in a May 9 column in state newspapers: "Gaining investment in the talented people and growing economic engine of Mississippi should be a top priority for our local and national leaders ... in George County, for example, the unemployment rate is nearly twice as high (and) simply put, we need the jobs supplied by the forest products industry. In fact, working forests (already) support over 47,000 jobs in Mississippi and a payroll of more than \$1.7 billion."

Arguing against the plant is the Ashville, North Carolina-based environmental group Dogwood Alliance. On their website, Dogwood asserts: "Enviva, the world's largest wood pellet manufacturer, is planning an enormous plant in Lucedale, Mississippi in the Gulf Coast region. If built, this plant will be the largest wood pellet plant in the world. Every year, up to 130,000 acres of forests would be cut down, turned into 1.4 million tons of wood pellets, and shipped overseas to be burned for electricity in Europe and Asia."

Gipson counters: "According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the total volume of trees grown in the U.S. Southeast has increased by 50 percent over the last 50 years, and today, private forest owners are growing 40 percent more wood than they remove every year. The reality is that a strong market for forest products ensures that landowners keep planting trees.

"While these out-of-state activists may live in a place that doesn't need or want forest industry jobs, we know better here in Mississippi. Let's continue finding ways to sustainably harness our abundant

natural resources and grow our rural economy, providing more opportunities for all Mississippians,” Gipson said.

In an opposing May 9 column in Mississippi newspapers, Piney Woods School alum Mary Annaise Heglar – who now lives in New York and identifies as a “climate justice essayist”- argues that Enviva is bringing an environmental danger to the state through increased health risks from emissions and airborne particles.

That claim belies the fact that Enviva since 2010 has already successfully operated a wood pellet facility in Amory, Mississippi, that can produce up to 110K metric tons of pellets in a plant that runs around the clock, seven days per week.

Hyperbole aside, Maryland-based biomass company Enviva is the world’s largest producer of wood pellets. The company owns and operates seven wood pellet plants in the Southeastern U.S. (in Virginia, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Florida) that produce over 3 million metric tons of wood pellets annually. The pellets are exported to end-use customers primarily in Europe and Asia.

The Dogwood Alliance and other environmental groups are opposed to cutting trees period. In parts of Mississippi like George County and Monroe County, money for rural Mississippians still grows on trees. As one of the state’s leading forestry experts confirmed to me this week: “Having an expanding market for wood energy is good for Mississippi on multiple fronts.”

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