

Pulp truth

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BlueGreen Alliance Joins USW in Holding Roundtable Discussions on Sustainable Manufacturing

This past fall the USW and BlueGreen Alliance (BGA) held four roundtable meetings in paper communities around the country to engage the union, pulp and paper industry and biomass energy sector in productive dialogue over the use of renewable energy.

The goals were to educate the membership about some of the national level policy work the USW supports; create a discussion on renewable energy among labor, environmental and industry groups; and give members the opportunity to provide feedback to those directly working on the issue.

The USW advocates the creation of renewable energy from the byproducts of manufacturing. The paper sector's use of wood, a renewable resource, makes it a leader in sustainable manufacturing.

Many U.S. pulp and paper mills supply a majority of their energy needs by burning "black liquor" – a mixture mostly containing the biological chemical lignin that is left over from chemical processes in the production of wood pulp. Pulp mills produce massive amounts of electricity, in many cases equivalent to the power usage of 10,000 to 80,000 homes. Some plants meet 100% of their energy needs with black liquor and sell electricity back to the grid.

The USW and the Sierra Club created BGA in 2006 to find ways the "blue" labor movement and "green" environmental movement in the U.S. could work together to advance the common goals of keeping good jobs in an economy while making progress on important environmental issues. The coalition now includes 11 labor unions and four environmental organizations.

The roundtable meetings attracted stakeholders from across the political and economic spectrum. Topics discussed included wood biomass availability; effects of renewable energy standards on wood supplies; sustainable forestry initiatives; emergence of a dedicated wood biomass energy industry; and, use of wood biomass energy in existing wood-based industries.

Roundtable Meetings

Local 11-63 from the Sappi Paper mill sponsored the first roundtable in Cloquet, Minn., on Oct. 13. Following the round-

table discussion and presentations on the use of wood biomass energy at Sappi, the USW participants expressed their plan to further educate and engage their members in renewable energy work.

Local 319 sponsored the second community gathering on Oct. 18 at the Village of Rothschild, Wis., where there is a Domtar Paper mill that will soon support a wood biomass-fueled power plant that WE Energies is building.

WE Energies will produce electricity from waste wood residues from the Domtar mill to produce renewable energy for distribution, and once the facility is built, the USW will represent the workers operating it.

"This power plant's use of wood byproducts will help to sustain the mill's existing operation," said District 2 Director Michael Bolton. "Cutting down our forests for energy alone isn't the answer; the solution is to generate energy from sustainable sources like the paper manufacturing processes, without overtaxing the resources and hurting the market."

At the third roundtable on Oct. 19 in Bangor, Maine, a joint labor-management group proposed to create a state-based committee, consisting of salaried employees and union workers, to gather data, conduct research, create a plan of action for Maine, and interact with state and local lawmakers on the importance of wood biomass energy to Maine's economy.

At the final roundtable discussion that Local 9-795 sponsored in Savannah, Ga., on Oct. 25 the participants discussed the importance of wood biomass energy to the continued operation of the International Paper mill there.

This series of roundtables was an important step in developing the conversation among all stakeholders and ensuring that sustainable manufacturing processes are used to produce alternative energy. It is critical that green industry policy focus not only on creating new jobs, but to preserve established family-supporting jobs that are key to the economic health of paper mill communities.