

## Biomass bonanza: Stoltze starts making power with co-generator

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After 14 months of planning and preparation, F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Co. unveiled its impressive biomass fueled co-generator to the public on Thursday.

The five-story building on the lumber company's Halfmoon grounds near Columbia Falls was in a whirl as scoops of sawdust and forest fallings were dumped into the boiler. The co-generator produces steam to run Stoltze's daily operations. It also provides electric power to be sold at wholesale rates on the power grid.

A 20-year agreement between Stoltze and Flathead Electric Cooperative kicked in at the start of October. The lumber company will receive its first check from the cooperative in early November.

"After spending money for so long, it's going to be nice to get a check back," Stoltze Vice President Chuck Roady said. "It cost us about \$22 million. We had to get the best available technology. That doesn't come cheap."

Roady, along with Stoltze steam and power plant manager Bryan O'Connor, led tours through the facility for members of the public and Gov. Steve Bullock.

"This facility makes a difference in the valley and it makes a difference in the state," the governor said. "This will go to power 2,500 homes."

The plant has the ability to generate 2.5 megawatts of power every year, and the sale of that power is what makes the plan workable for Stoltze. The lumber company will receive renewable energy credits as part of the deal.

"[Stoltze] has always been leading in green or renewable technology," Roady said. "So I wouldn't say this is a new direction for us, but it's certainly a new step. We're hoping to pay it off in a little over 10 years."



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Chuck Roady, F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Co. vice president and general manager, left, talks about the company's new \$22 million co-generation plant with Montana Gov. Steve Bullock Thursday during a tour of the facility in Columbia Falls.

Before introducing the governor, Roady had scores of people to thank for helping get the plant running. The Stoltze family, now in its sixth generation in Montana and 101 years in operation as a lumber company, gave Roady, O'Connor and others the go-ahead for the ambitious project.

"They had the faith to let us try this," Roady said. "That's a huge weight to have on your back in one way, but it's a good one."

Flathead Electric and Bonneville Power Administration have signed seven interconnection agreements with Stoltze to put the power on the grid.

Ken Sugden, the cooperative's general manager, was thankful everything worked out between the entities.

"It's been a long haul, but we put it together," he said. "We've been buying energy since Oct. 1."

The plant itself generates steam to run Stoltze's lumber-drying kilns, sawmill buildings and electricity-generating turbine. Long conveyor belts bring the mulch-like biomass to the boiler.

Extensive permitting went into getting the plant up and running, but Roady said the Montana Department of Environmental Quality and Department of Renewable Energy were all extremely helpful in the process.

Stoltze wanted to build a 25-megawatt facility, as it would cost nearly the same as the smaller one, but that far exceeded the co-op's capabilities, so it was scaled back.

The boiler fires the biomass and the ash is sent through pipes and dumped into a receptacle. The adjacent steam facility cools the water "to within 1 degree of what we took it out of the ground."

To mitigate the noise, machinery was placed in the middle of Stoltze land to avoid bothering the community.

"It's noisy, sure," Roady said. "But we at Stoltze are sure glad for that noise, because that means it is working."

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