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Plant Closures could be Turning Point for Minnesota Biomass Industry

Minnesota utility regulators are studying a proposal by Xcel Energy to close two biomass plants that could mark a turning point for the industry, particularly as prices for renewable energy drop.

The proposal – which has approval by the state legislature and the communities affected – would close Benson Power, which burns turkey waste and wood, as well as a biomass plant in northern Minnesota owned by the Laurentian Energy Authority (LEA). Closing the two plants, which make up half of Minnesota’s biomass generation, could cost hundreds of jobs, and state forest management officials say it will create turmoil among various suppliers to the plants. Their message is simple: slow down.

The legislature passed a bill last session supporting Xcel’s plan to close the plant and devote $54 million over a number of years from the state’s Renewable Development Fund to assist the communities in transitioning away from biomass. A state development agency is also looking at the economic impact and potential of the closures. The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission has announced it will make a decision by the end of the year. The commission will rule on whether to allow Xcel to cancel power purchase agreements and buy and close both plants.

The situation raises the question of what is the role of biomass in the state’s energy strategy, leaving biomass advocates wondering if Minnesota will have much of an industry left. District Energy’s president and CEO, Ken Smith, believes Benson Power and LEA represent a turning point. “The situation raises the question in Minnesota of what is the role of biomass in the energy strategy in this state,” Smith said. “It’s not particularly clear at this time.”

— SWIFT COUNTY MONITOR-NEWS