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Lakeview Biofuel Plant Proposal Raises Air Quality Concerns

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A Colorado company wants to build a biofuel plant in Lakeview Oregon, where it would produce jet fuel and diesel for Southwest Airline and the U.S. Department of Defense. That would create jobs and produce more air pollution. | credit: U.S. Forest Service |

A project proposed in Lakeview, Oregon, would turn woody biomass from logging into biofuels for Southwest Airlines, the U.S. Navy and Marines.

The biofuel would have fewer greenhouse gas emissions than traditional jet fuel and diesel, but some worry the project might add to existing air quality problems in southern Oregon.

Red Rock Biofuels of Fort Collins, Colorado, received a \$4.1 million design and engineering grant from the U.S. Department of Defense earlier to help develop the project.

On Friday, [the department announced](#) new contracts with the company to supply fuel to the U.S. Navy and Marines. This week, Southwest Airlines [announced plans](#) to buy 3 million gallons of the company's low-carbon jet fuel.

The biofuel refinery has yet to be built, but it's clearly gaining momentum.

Betty Riley, executive director of the South Central Oregon Economic Development District, said most people in the community are "tentatively optimistic" that the project will be built as planned. But they're cautious about new developments – particularly after Iberdrolas [decided to halt construction](#) on its \$100 million Lakeview biomass plant in 2011.

"It's a new technology, so it's always challenging to see if they can make it pencil," Riley said. "But apparently they've done a lot of background work, and with the contracts and the support of the federal government, it is something that hopefully can sustain itself over time."

But Lakeview resident Chris Zinda sees a problem looming. The area already has too much air pollution, he says, and a biofuel plant would add more.

"Lakeview already has poor air quality as it is," Zinda said. "We've permitted a biomass facility in our already poor air quality. Now we have a proposed biofuel plant to boot."

Zinda recently joined the Northwest Environmental Defense Center and several other environmental groups in [petitioning the Environmental Protection Agency](#) to reclassify Lakeview as a "non-attainment area" – or an area that doesn't meet air quality standards under the Clean Air Act. If successful, the petition would result in new rules that would require Red Rock Biofuels to reduce or offset its air emissions so it doesn't add to existing air pollution.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has recognized Lakeview's air quality problem. The levels of particulate matter in the air exceeds the federally allowed limit – mostly because of wood stove pollution that gets trapped in the area during weather inversions.

The agency has [proposed a plan](#) that aims to avoid an EPA "non-attainment area" designation. The plan acknowledges that additional industry proposed in the Lakeview area will bump up against air pollution limits, preventing the state from issuing development permits.

"Any intermediate size to large industry wishing to expand or establish in Lakeview is restricted from doing so," the agency states in justifying its plan.

So, its plan recommends replacing old wood stoves and shifting people away from wood-fired heat. It also proposes allowing companies to buy wood stove emissions offsets.

But Zinda says the DEQ hasn't gone far enough. He wants the EPA to require all major polluters in Lakeview to reduce their emissions, as it would if the area were classified as "non-attainment."

"Why should the citizens pay in their health and pocketbook while industry continues to pollute?" he said. "Corporations should at least be required to pay to worsen our air quality."

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