Senate approves Legacy Biomass bill

Local News

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Olympia, WA - Rural jobs and the environment may be protected under a bill adopted Saturday by the Washington State Senate.Senate Bill 5575 will alter some of the regulations of Initiative 937, adding new sources to the list of eligible biomass products, organic matter used to generate electricity with steam turbines. The bill will also allow biomass facilities in operation before 1999 to qualify as eligible for renewable energy credits. “This is as much about saving rural jobs as it is about promoting renewable energy,” said Sen. Brian Hatfield, D-Raymond, the bill’s sponsor. By making these changes, we allow mills that have been the driving force for many rural communities to remain competitive and continue to provide hundreds of jobs across the state. - Brian Hatfield“We must maintain our state’s commitment to renewable energy, as well as our commitment to vibrant local economies,” said Sen. Kevin Ranker, D-Orcas Island, chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy, Natural Resources and Marine Waters. “This proposal better fits the energy, economic and ecological needs of our state. We have the chance to make changes that not only reward the pursuit of renewable energy, but also make the law more efficient for businesses.”

Following the passage of Initiative 937 in 2006, public utility districts with 25,000 or more customers were required to meet targets for energy conservation and to use eligible renewable energy resources, either by acquiring eligible renewable resources for energy production or purchasing renewable energy credits. However, the initiative applied only to facilities constructed after March 31, 1999; facilities built before that date would be unable to sell the biomass energy generated in their power plants as renewable energy, putting them at a significant disadvantage. SB 5575 makes biomass facilities operating before that eligible, provided they are owned or directly interconnected to a qualifying utility.“The date March 31, 1999, was an arbitrary number that is having a significant impact on sustaining jobs in rural areas of Washington,” Hatfield said. “There is no good reason for putting those family wage jobs at risk, in communities that have been fighting double-digit unemployment since before the recession.”While allowing older facilities to qualify for renewable energy credits, SB 5575 also adds organic by-products of pulping and the wood manufacturing process, known as black liquor, to the definition of biomass. “Since pulping liquors are not qualified as renewable resources under I-937, they can’t bid on requests for proposals seeking renewable energy and that puts them at a huge disadvantage,” said Hatfield. “Several states consider pulping liquors as renewable, so why not Washington?”The bill also adds liquors derived from algae and other sources, yard waste, food waste and food processing residues as eligible biomass.Said Ranker, “This is the beginning of a conversation to take place this session regarding fundamental change so the state can operate more efficiently, better serve the public and create jobs now. It’s sensible government reforms like this that will help our state move beyond the Great Recession.” “This is one of the most important bills on job creation that will come before the Senate this session,” said Hatfield. “In passing this bill, we can be both responsible stewards of the environment and support the communities who need to keep these jobs now more than ever.”

The bill passed with strong bipartisan support by a vote of 45-1. It now heads to the House for further consideration.
- Ian Cope, Senate Democratic Caucus