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Europe's Green-Fuel Search Turns to America's Forests

In the past two weeks, news reports have covered European Union rules mandating that 20% of energy in EU countries by 2020 must come from "renewable" sources. To meet the requirement, European utilities are increasingly turning toward burning wood instead of coal—with much of the wood coming from the United States in the form of pellets.

Some environmentalists complain that cutting down trees is hardly a "green" solution, while utility-company officials have defended the practice of using woody biomass as a renewable energy source. Yet one point of view hasn't been much in evidence in the debate. That is the view of independent forest owners like me—my family manages 2,500 acres of forest in Georgia—who can speak directly to practices of the forestry industry and the benefits the industry provides local communities.

First, some perspective on the U.S. wealth of natural resources: The American South has more than 214 million acres of forest land, according to the Southern Group of State Foresters. About 89% is privately owned, making it the nation's stronghold for private forest ownership and stewardship.

Although the U.S. has a large amount of forested land, that does not mean the country can afford to cut down trees in a careless, slash-and-burn fashion as in decades past—and that is certainly not what is happening today.

Europe's increasing use of woody biomass, such as wood pellets, has not resulted in the inappropriate over-harvesting of U.S. forests that some fear. The demand has created a viable use for woody material from forestry operations that typically goes to waste. Twigs and limbs—plus woody material from thinning operations in which unsalable trees are removed to allow other trees to grow stronger and healthier—that would otherwise rot are used for biomass. Using this resource for energy puts it to good use and is a wise thing to do.

There is a common-sense approach to sustainably managing the nation's forests. Americans have learned that they need to be good stewards of the land, and forest owners throughout the Southeast can be very proud of their forest management. Sustainable methods and best practices have been established, which include replanting trees and ensuring that tree harvesting is done in a way that protects wildlife as well as air and water quality.

The forestry industry and thus the forest owners are governed by federal and state laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act and Healthy Forests Initiative. There also are independent certifications that govern all forestry industries. The type of certification a landowner chooses is up to the owner, but the standards are in place. Individual forest owners also work hand-in-hand with state forestry officials and with experienced licensed foresters for proper forestry management.

Just as musicians are passionate about their craft, independent forest owners are passionate about the art of land management. Our mantra is to leave the land in better shape than when we found it. Not only do we care about this from aesthetic and recreational perspectives, but for many it is good business to care.

Forest owners who sell timber have an incentive to ensure that their forests remain healthy, productive and sustainable. Anything else would hurt the bottom line and threaten their investment. Sound practices also create and protect jobs. In Georgia alone, there are 24 million acres of forested land. According to state-government estimates, this translates to roughly 188,000 jobs and \$25 billion of economic impact related to forestry. In the states that produce woody biomass, what was once a declining job market has new hope as forestry puts people back to work in jobs connected to a resource that is natural, organic and renewable.

I am also concerned about what I call "The Invisible Forest Health Crisis"—the loss of natural lands to growth and development. Landowners sometimes have tough choices to make: sell the land so it can become some community's strip mall, or keep the land as a sustainably managed working forest. More demand for forest products increases the likelihood of those forests remaining intact.

As a land and forest owner I recognize that I can't stop growth. But as a lifelong nature lover and environmentalist, I can guide it. Preserving our forests and fostering the use of wood products, including woody biomass—while also helping Europe meet its admirable goals for renewable-energy sources—is not a bad proposition.

Mr. Leavell is the keyboardist for the Rolling Stones and co-founder of the environmental website, the Mother Nature Network (www.mnn.com). His most recent book is "Growing a Better America: Smart, Strong and Sustainable" (Evergreen Arts, 2011).

