

The Watershed Advocate

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The Catskill Watershed Corporation

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Staying warm: Grass pellets may be one solution

The potential of grass pellets and woody biomass as sources of home-grown heat is being explored in separate research projects sponsored by the CWC and the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC).

The Franklin Town Highway Garage is the first of several Watershed buildings selected as a test site for a CWC-funded study by Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) to explore the feasibility of utilizing grass pellets as a bio-energy source for heating. Indoor and outdoor pellet-fired units will be installed at each site so that people can see both types of heating units in action. Their operation will be monitored for effectiveness, efficiency and ease of use, their air quality impacts will be gauged, and operation and maintenance issues examined.

The study will also determine the cost savings of using grass pellets instead of other forms of fuel. The Town of Franklin, for example, burned 3,000 gallons of fuel oil last year. The boiler that currently warms the highway garage uses about two and a quarter gallons per hour, and runs on average 12 hours a day in the winter. Thus the pellet stove project "is a pretty hot topic of conversation here, especially with the price of fuel," remarked Highway Superintendent Mark Laing.

Stoves that use wood pellets, made of sawdust and byproducts from sawmills and wood-working facilities, corn and even cherry pits have become very popular in light of high oil prices. The CWC project seeks to find a reliable and profitable way to produce grass pellets to use in these stoves, thus turning vacant grasslands in the Watershed "into one more weapon in the arsenal of alternative fuels," according to CWC Economic Development Director Mike Triolo.

At its meeting September 25, the CWC Board of

Troy Cave, a Franklin highway department employee, shows off the grass pellet stove that warms the offices and meeting room at the highway garage.



Directors authorized the expenditure of up to \$195,500 from the Catskill Fund for the Future for the three-year pilot project. Paul Cerosaletti and Marianne Kiraly of CCE have been consulting with Cornell agriculture professor Jerry Cherney, an avid promoter of the development of grass pellets as a low-tech, small-scale, environmentally-friendly, renewable energy system that can be locally produced, processed and consumed.

Prof. Cherney spoke on this topic at the 2006 Catskills Local Government Day, when he noted that New York State has about 1.5 million acres of unused or underutilized agricultural land, most of which is already growing grass. Farmers no longer raising dairy cows, landowners who have their fields mowed to retain open vistas, even New York City which is acquiring Watershed lands to prevent development and preserve water quality could turn unused grass into cash, and fuel. "We think testing the stoves for grass pellets, and demonstrating their use will create demand so that some folks

Need information?

Marcellus Shale drilling

As a public service, the CWC is offering a folder of information culled from various sources for landowners, municipal officials and Catskills residents interested in or concerned about the possibility for natural gas exploration in the Marcellus shale formation. The packet is available to anyone upon request: Call toll-free 877-WAT-SHED (928-7433); or 845-586-1400. The CWC has also added a page of pertinent Marcellus shale-related links to its website:

www.cwconline.org, where you will also find details on a forum on the issue being planned for the spring.

Knotweed

Call us toll free at 877-928-7433 for a packet of information on how to prevent the start or spread of Japanese knotweed (informally known as "bamboo"), and how to deal with it once this invasive plant takes root.

Water testing

Homeowners seeking to have their water tested for coliform/E.coli bacteria at the Catskill Regional Water Testing Laboratory (CRWTL) in Delhi can pick up free collection bottles and instructions at several locations. Bottles are available at the lab (5 1/2 Main St., Delhi) or at Stamford Village Hall (84 Main Street, Stamford - 607-652-6671), Walton Town Hall (129 North Street, Walton - 607-865-5766), the Watershed Assistance Program office, 6049 Main St., Tannersville (518-589-6871) and the CWC, 905 Main St., Margaretville (845-586-1400).

Water samples for the total coliform/E.coli - presence/absence test must be taken directly to the laboratory (not the bottle distribution point) within 24 hours of being drawn. The lab can accept samples for this test between 8 am and 3 pm Mondays through Thursdays only. The test fee is \$30. For more info, contact the lab 607-746-8626, or visit www.catskillwaterlab.org.

Grass pellet study

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might go into the pelletizing business, and that would create jobs," explained Mike Triolo.

Bob and May Miller have already taken the leap, establishing a grass pelletization plant in Wells Bridge, Otsego County. They have been purchasing hay from Delaware and Otsego County farmers from a 40-mile radius, grinding and pelletizing it, and selling it by the bag to individual homeowners who had primarily used wood pellets in their pellet stoves. While ash removal has presented problems for some, most customers have been satisfied with the grass pellets.

The Millers, who operate the plant with their son Mike and his wife Mary Lou, heat the 40x60-foot building with its 18-foot ceilings, exclusively with an outdoor furnace that burns grass pellets. They have been working to develop the optimum pellet composition, size and moisture content and to produce a consistent product so that heat output can be tested. "We're making a better pellet as we go. This is all new to everybody," said May Miller.

She and her husband were raised on dairy farms and ran one in Franklin, Delaware County, for many years until they retired from farming. But their love of the land did not diminish. "We'd see grass going to waste, fields growing up to goldenrod, and it hurt our hearts to see that," May Miller remarked.

So, in their early 70s, the Millers decided to try a new venture. "We just like the idea of keeping the land in

some sort of production so future generations, someday, might learn to grow food on it again. Plus, mowing hay for grass pellets lets farmers use equipment in the off times."

When the other sites are selected for CWC-sponsored testing of grass pellet-burning stoves, the Millers will supply the fuel. Open houses will be scheduled at the demonstration sites so that the public can see both small and large scale applications of this heating technology.

Wood chips, too

Meanwhile, five facilities, including three schools, have been selected to participate in a WAC study that may lead to retrofitting their heating systems to use wood chips instead of fossil fuels.

Catskill Craftsmen, Inc., a wood products manufacturing firm in Stamford; O'Connor Hospital in Delhi; South Kortright Central School; Onteora Middle/High School in Boiceville; and Cairo-Durham Middle/High School in Greene County will undergo analysis of current energy demands and the economic, environmental and technical feasibility of retrofitting or replacing existing boiler systems to accommodate wood as a renewable fuel option.

Studies will also describe the current technology available for using locally produced wood-chips from the region's abundant low-grade forest resources.