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Timber sale extends Tok School's biomass-fueled power system

(Tok, AK) – A recent state timber sale will ensure the Tok School can keep relying on locally-produced wood chips to generate heat and electricity, while reducing hazardous fuels and risk of wildland fires around the community.

The state Division of Forestry signed a timber sale contract last week with the Alaska Gateway School District to purchase the equivalent of nearly 700 cords of firewood for \$17,520 in the Tok Hazardous Fuels #1 sale, Director Chris Maisch said today.

“This sale provides a long-term, stable fuel supply for the Tok School biomass facility and demonstrates how well-managed forests can provide economic opportunities and reduce wildfire risk for the community and residents,” Maish said.

The five-year contract, with an optional one-year extension, covers approximately 75 acres along the outside edge of fuel breaks previously constructed north of Tok. The timber is mostly white spruce averaging seven inches around. The school will hire a local contractor to harvest and chip wood from about 20 acres a year, generating 50 tons of biomass per acre.

The Tok School's biomass facility was built in 2010 to help combat high local heating fuel and electrical costs. Initially, a biomass boiler burning wood chips from local forest thinning projects heated the 80,000 square-foot school. A year later, a low-speed electric steam turbine was added to create a combined heat and power (CHP) system providing both heat and electricity to both the school and a 2,400 square-foot, on-campus greenhouse. In 2014, a steam engine was added to the system to produce more power.

“The Tok School biomass facility demonstrates yet another way Alaskans are using our natural resources to improve the quality of life and reduce the cost of living,” said Governor Michael J. Dunleavy. “I'm proud of the innovators who got this project rolling, and of the staff of the Division of Forestry who are helping to keep it going strong.”

(MORE)

Burning wood instead of 59,000 gallons of heating fuel saves the district about \$280,000 a year, said District Superintendent Scott MacManus, who added that the Tok School's biomass facility has been as a model for other Alaska biomass projects.

"Between heat and power, we're probably saving \$400,000 to \$500,000 a year," said MacManus. "That money goes toward better education, counselors, arts programs and science, technology, engineering and mathematics programs; those are the things that keep kids in school."

In addition to saving energy costs, the biomass-heated greenhouse produces 20,000 pounds of fresh vegetables each year which the district uses to help feed students, MacManus said. Earlier this year, the district added hydroponic unit producing 150-200 heads of lettuce per week for the school or for sale to local markets. The district plans to add two more greenhouses in the future.

The biomass project also reduces the threat of wildfires in the Tok area by reducing hazardous fuels identified in a 2010 Community Wildfire Protection Plan, Maisch said. It is also integrated into the school curriculum to teach students about sustainable energy and the value and importance of the forest, MacManus said.

The Division of Forestry has identified nine future local hazardous fuels sales, all of them including commercial and biomass components, and all of which would fit the school system's needs, said Tok Area Forester Nick Carter. Those sales could be used for a combination of biomass and commercial timber, at the discretion of other buyers.

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