

Fighting ‘misdirection’

A dear friend sent me a message at Christmas with a lot of wisdom in it: Next time you feel yourself getting pulled into other people’s nonsense, repeat to yourself, “Not my circus, not my monkeys.”

I am getting pulled into other people’s nonsense. It’s inspired by what I will call the fact-free screed recently circulated regarding the biomass power plant at Pepekeo. I am being asked questions about it by friends and neighbors because of my long experience in forestry on this coast.

My distaste for seeing people spread misstatements and misdirection to a community I love has overcome “don’t get pulled into other people’s nonsense.” So I am sharing five lessons I learned doing forestry work here for the past 20 years.

1. A forestry biomass system stores and circulates carbon. Trees sequester carbon from the air, combustion releases it and trees sequester it again. Eucalyptus is very good at sequestering on this coast because of its tremendous rate of growth, the opinion of science-deniers notwithstanding.

2. Power plants operate under very strict, effective air pollution laws enforced by serious people at the Department of Health and by a no-nonsense federal Environmental Protection Agency. Air quality monitoring at the plant will be continuous, and the data available to the public. BACT, or best available current technology, for air pollution control must be installed before the plant can be permitted to start. BACT means the best there is — what it costs is not a consideration.

I know something about this because I spent two years permitting a eucalyptus-burning biomass plant at Ookala. That plant was not built because of a failure of funding. Without getting into micro-grams of ketones in the air, the plant we permitted would have created less smoke than an imu roasting a pig. For reals. And the Pepekeo plant air-pollution control equipment is more sophisticated than what we planned at Ookala.

3. Every form of renewable energy has advantages and disadvantages. A balance of different methods of generation avoids having the disadvantages of one method becoming a serious problem. The big advantage of biomass power is that it keeps the lights on when the wind doesn’t blow and the sun doesn’t shine.

4. The establishment of eucalyptus plantations on this coast created a very significant improvement in the fertility and water permeability of the soils they are planted on. This is because the eucalyptus roots go very deep, penetrating the hard pan that came from a century of plowing. The roots bring the nutrients deep in the soil up through the tree and into the topsoil through leaf fall. Tree planting started in 1999. You might have noticed that by 2000 and 2001 the big red soil plumes in the ocean we used to have after every storm diminished, then went away. Permanently.

5. The truck traffic created by this facility would be a fraction of a 1 percent increase in vehicles using the highway. There are typically 400-500 vehicles per hour going each direction on the highway. (Count them yourself, if you are skeptical.) Add two log trucks per hour, and nobody’s life changes. This kind of nonissue is called misdirection.

In my opinion, the Honua Ola power plant (formerly called Hu Honua) is a much-needed and environmentally appropriate source of renewable power for Hawaii Island.

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