

## **Abstract - *Harnessing the Power of Local Wood Energy* \***

While energy costs continue to rise with no end currently in sight, one Vermont community is developing a community wood energy plan that saves money, reduces its dependence on foreign oil, combats climate change, improves forest health, and supports local industries and workers. *Harnessing the Power of Local Wood Energy* is a community resource guide that uses the Mt. Abe pilot project in Bristol, Vermont, as a case study to provide a community wood energy framework that other communities can use to develop a standard for assuring that the wood is sourced and utilized in a “Sustainable, Efficient, Local, and Fair (SELF)” manner.

In 2006, Mt. Abraham Union High School (Mt. Abe), located in Bristol, Vermont, installed a woodchip heating system. Following installation some community members voiced a desire to conserve forest health and better support local workers when procuring wood. To source wood in a way that is “Sustainable, Efficient, Local and Fair,” they realized that they needed to address woodchip procurement at all points along the supply chain.

In order to better understand the challenges to woodchip procurement, individuals from the Forest Guild, Vermont Family Forests (VFF), the Starksboro Conservation Commission, the Biomass Energy Resource Center, the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, and the Northern Forest Alliance launched the first phase of the Mt. Abe Community Wood Energy Pilot Project. The Forest Guild recruited a summer intern from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (sponsored by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation) to work with VFF, Forest Guild professional foresters, and Mt. Abe community members to identify key stakeholders and the challenges and opportunities to sourcing woodchips from small municipal and family forests.

*Harnessing the Power of Local Wood Energy* presents the results of the first phase of the pilot project. Some of the challenges in supplying Mt. Abe with wood include: the current woodchip market price does not cover harvesting costs on the small-scale of most family forests; schools depend on large woodchip customers and the forest products industry to support the harvesting and production infrastructure; there are both uncertainties over how much wood to leave to conserve forest health and disagreements over the long-term ecological impacts of harvesting wood; the costs and benefits of woodchip production are not evenly distributed; and the general public lacks a basic understanding of the goods and services that their forests provide.

Through the pilot project, the Mt. Abe community has had a chance to express its values and needs, which is important for building the trust necessary to identify and bridge potential obstacles to ensuring a sustainable energy plan. A number of steps that Mt. Abe is following to create a reliable supply of woodchips sourced using a SELF-standard include: consulting with local experts, identifying the suppliers and elucidating the wood supply chain from forest to school, developing a community-accepted procurement standard, and increasing the number of local family-forest owners who contribute to the woodchip supply. These steps and other lessons learned from Mt. Abe are summarized in a series of toolboxes for quick reference.

By using this community reference guide, *Harnessing the Power of Local Wood Energy*, countless rural communities throughout New England can profit from the Mt. Abe community’s experience and follow in Mt. Abe’s footsteps toward the goal of developing their own community energy plan that saves money, reduces dependence on foreign oil, decreases carbon dioxide emissions, conserves forest health, and supports the local economy.

\*Caitlin Cusack, 2008. *Harnessing the Power of Local Wood Energy: Ensuring a sustainable supply of woodchips for your school.*

Available for download at [www.forestguild.org/publications/research/2008/Local\\_Wood\\_Energy.pdf](http://www.forestguild.org/publications/research/2008/Local_Wood_Energy.pdf)