

Wood pellet plant to be built in George County

By Royce Armstrong

Release date: 1/10/19

The George County Board of Supervisors were able to ring in the New Year with some good news – perhaps the biggest news to ever hit the county, according to one supervisor.

Stefano Ratti made a quick trip from meeting with the Jackson County Board of Supervisors to appear before the George County Board, gathering signatures on a Memorandum of Understanding between the two counties and the port authority in Pascagoula. Ratti is Director of Corporate Development for Enviva Partners LP.

Ratti, George County Board President Larry McDonald and Economic Development Director Ken Flanagan left after the meeting for a meeting with Governor Phil Bryant in Jackson on Monday evening and with members of the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) on Tuesday for additional signatures.

The Memorandum outlines pages of agreements between the State, George County, Jackson County and the Port Authority. This agreement finally makes official Enviva's plan to build a \$130 million wood pellet plant in George County.

“The Enviva project will have a tremendous economic impact on our County with 90 full time jobs and approximately 300 indirect jobs,” said Board President Larry McDonald. “This will also provide a much needed market for our timber industry.

“After our Monday Board meeting, Ken Flanagan and I traveled to Jackson to meet Governor Bryant, the entire Enviva Management team, and Mississippi Development Authority's staff to discuss grant funding and infrastructure needs for this project.”

Enviva is the world's largest producer of utility grade wood pellets used as fuel for electrical power generators, according to Ratti. Enviva has contracts for all of its pellet capacity for the next 15 years, he said. The wood pellets produced in George County will come from a “wood basket area” with about a 75-mile diameter from Lucedale and will be shipped to electrical power plants in Japan.

Enviva, based in Maryland, has seven pellet plants already in operation. Ratti said the company plans to begin construction on the Lucedale plant within the next six months, hopefully as early as March.

The actual construction is still contingent on weather and finalization of agreements.

The plant will employ up to 300 people during its construction over the next two years, once it is operational, will employ about 90 people full time.

It has been a long time coming.

The George County Board of Supervisors has been working on bringing a wood pellet mill to George County for the past 12 years. Discussions began with first one group and then moved to another and yet another as circumstances for the interested parties changed. Seven years ago, the Swedish-based company Green Circle Bio Energy, after months of negotiations, announced

plans to build a 350 to 500 metric ton pellet plant in George County. Construction of that plant met with delay after delay until it was finally announced in October 2014 that Green Circle was being sold to Enviva.

At that time Enviva was already in the midst of construction projects elsewhere and put the George County plant on hold.

Supervisor Wright said some of the criteria the supervisors had was a company with the financial ability to build and operate a plant, a stable and long-term market for the pellets and a commitment to the community.

“I knew that it would take a long time,” said District Two Supervisor Kelly Wright, who was board president 12 years ago when discussions with potential pellet plant companies first began. “I had no idea that it would take this long. We have learned a lot. There are so many entities you have to work with – state and federal agencies, investor groups, environmental groups, the railroad, the port authority. You can be to the point of agreement with one group, and then if a key person retires, you have to start all over again to bring the new person or people up to speed.”

Wright said he never had any doubt the county would be able to bring a pellet mill to its Industrial Park. It was just a matter of when. In preparation the supervisors have spent untold hours securing millions of dollars in both public and private grant money to build and maintain the necessary infrastructure to support the pellet plant.

This has included purchasing land for the facility that was in turn sold to Enviva, building or improving roadways, putting larger electrical, water and wastewater facilities in place, improved rail access and a water well and storage tank.

For more information on Enviva or to learn about employment opportunities with the company, please visit the Enviva website at www.envivabiomass.com.