



## Permit for Gulf County biomass plant in challenged

[TIM CROFT / Florida Freedom](#)

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PORT ST. JOE — A group of local citizens has filed a petition requesting an administrative hearing on the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's notice of intent to issue an air emissions permit for the Northwest Florida Renewable Energy Center.

The petition was filed by Margaret Sheehan, a Massachusetts-based environmental attorney. She filed the petition on behalf of a group called Help Save the Apalachicola River, Wewahitchka resident Marilyn Blackwell, Port St. Joe residents Landy Luther and Annie Sue Fields and Tallahassee resident Robert Fulford.

A Tallahassee attorney, David Ludder, has submitted a letter to Gov. Rick Scott as well as the secretary for the DEP alerting them that Ludder represents Fields, Blackwell and Port St. Joe resident John Byrd.

In his letter, Ludder states that if the DEP grants the air emissions permit, Ludder will respond with a civil rights claim against the DEP with the aim of having all federal funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to the DEP halted.

Ludder claims that 69 percent of the population living within two kilometers of the proposed woody biomass plant, is African-American, compared to 16.4 percent of the county's total population, meaning that African-American residents will be unduly and unfairly impacted by air pollution from the plant.

Sheehan said her petition is based on information missing from the draft permit and also what she termed as improper emissions standards used in establishing the permit criteria.

"The most critical aspect of the permit is that due to using the wrong emissions standards it was qualified as a minor source of air pollution," Sheehan said, noting that distinction allows the plant to avoid more stringent standards she said it should be held to due to the amount of pollutants coming from the plant.

"That has major repercussions for health and the environment."

The Florida Department of Administrative Hearings is expected to schedule a hearing on the permit in the next 30 days. The hearing would be in Tallahassee.

While Sheehan's petition targets a state agency, Dr. Bill Sammons, a pediatrician based in Washington State, said Port St. Joe city and county officials should be taking a closer look at the plant and its "long-term impacts on the community."

Sammons, who like Sheehan provided a presentation during informational meetings sponsored by Gulf Citizens for Clean, Renewable Energy, said the fundamental problem with the plant is the emissions profile.

"There is absolute consensus in the medical community that there is no safe threshold for particulate emissions," Sammons said, adding that while scrubbers and bag houses at the plant may help rid some particulate pollution, recent science has indicated there is little protection for the microscopic "nano" particulates, not fully addressed in current regulations.

"We still get back to the fundamental point is that biomass combustion has health impacts. I do not think you can find credible studies that will tell you there is a safe level of particulates," Sammons added.

Organizations such as the American Heart Association and the American Lung Association as well as federal

and state physicians' organizations have expressed deep concerns about the burning of biomass.

Sammons argues that regulatory agencies are playing catch-up to science and falling behind. Regulations, he contends, simply have not kept pace with science that shows that small particulate pollution for combustion of substances such as woody biomass have significant health impacts on breathing, heart conditions, immune systems and more.

Sammons noted that woody biomass plants similar to the one proposed for Port St. Joe are smaller in scale and producing a relatively small amount of electricity.

"(The Port St. Joe plant) is a huge experiment," said Joy Towles Ezell, a Florida-based environmental advocate critical of the project.

Rentech has said its has no plans to use fast-growing grasses in the process. However, Sammons and Sheehan said that flies in the face of the language of the air emissions permit given that the company could reverse course on those highly-invasive species as language about their use remains in the permit documents.

If the company did not intend to use fast-growing grasses the company could have stated that in the permit documents.

"There is a contradiction between what (Rentech is) saying and what is in the permit documents," Sheehan said. "They still have the option. The door is open to go back later."

Sammons also said that his research into the SilvaGas gasifier that will be used for the first time on a commercial scale in Port St. Joe is, at its most basic, technology developed by Germany in the 1930s. He said the assertions about carbon neutrality are incorrect given the levels of particulates and carbon dioxide emitting from the plant.

The Department of Energy has put a loan guarantee for the project on hold, but that would not prevent the project from moving ahead, but only whittle at the profit margin, Sheehan said. The loan guarantee was just one form of subsidy, Sheehan noted, and not having the guarantee does not render the project unviable.

"These things won't be built without a lot of tax money being thrown into it," said Towles Ezell.

As for the potential jobs to be created by the project, Towles Ezell said those benefits are outweighed by the risks.

"We have too much dioxin already," she said. "You had the paper mill and Arizona Chemical and now they are gone. You don't need to add any more toxins in the air.

"You have the most wonderful natural resources. You should build on them and not destroy them. Build on what you have."