

Bowland Bioenergy

The expanding woodfuel market has led one of the North West's leading biomass suppliers to set itself the target of doubling its output over the next five years.

That is the ambitious goal of Bowland Bioenergy based in Downham, near Clitheroe, Lancashire.

Established in 2005, company directors Mike Ingoldby and Ralph Assheton have developed a business vision based on a virtuous circle.

Actively managing more of Lancashire's woods will improve biodiversity, whilst harvesting timber contributes to the sustainable supply of biomass, a more eco-friendly form of energy generation than oil or gas, which also supports the rural economy.

Expanding

After a steady start, the order books have expanded significantly in the last few years and the company now has contracts to supply 13 schools in east Lancashire with dried

woodfuel, along with other clients including horticultural businesses, housing developments, large country houses and higher education establishments.

With more schools in particular using biomass, the firm benefited from a £29,000 grant from the Pennine Lancashire Local Action Group in 2011 to expand production by roofing a storage facility.

Mike Ingoldby said: "We sell our energy measured in kilowatt hours (kWh) as this is the most equitable method for both customer and supplier. The market was slow to develop for a number of reasons - customer caution over 'new' technology and a low level of understanding among architects, designers and builders. From supplying around 2.5 million kWh two years ago we have doubled production in 2012 and based on the contracts being secured for the next heating season, we expect to double production again in the near future. That's significant



growth by any standard.

"With more and more boilers being fitted across public and private sectors, there's considerable scope for this rate of increase to be maintained. Our number one priority is to produce high quality wood fuel to BS EN 14961 and an efficient supply chain."

Bowland Bioenergy was the first UK company to qualify for HETAS accreditation and subsequently Woodsure+. It also backs the Woodfuel Suppliers Group programme to require all wood fuel suppliers to demonstrate their ability to produce fuel to the British Standard.

Consultancy

Bowland Bioenergy is now offering a broader consultancy service so they can project manage schemes from sourcing, processing and supplying biomass to getting storage and heating systems installed and working. By offering customers a seamless service, logistical, technical and compatibility problems can be overcome, whilst the company also diversifies its business.

The Government's Renewable Heat Incentive scheme, which offers grants to encourage commercial users to switch from fossil fuels to greener energy, is also beginning to

have an impact through an increasing number of serious enquiries for fuel and boilers.

The next stage for the company is to invest over £100,000 in timber drying equipment – currently all wood is air dried to reduce moisture content to an optimal level for efficient burning. Using the drier will significantly reduce this time. More people will also be recruited if the company's growth is maintained.

Challenges

The woodfuel market is a major growth sector, but it has its challenges.

Mike Ingoldby adds: "Many companies have jumped on the bandwagon, thinking that selling boilers or wood fuel is a simple undertaking. In our view many of these are failing to provide their customers with all the information required to make an informed choice as to the suitability of wood fuel. In large organisations the people who manage the boiler and fuel supply on a daily basis are very often those with the least knowledge of the requirements of the technology.

"Considerable input of information and support is often required from the fuel supplier until staff have the confidence to manage the heating system



on their own. Suppliers who do not have the required depth of knowledge are unable to provide this expertise and biomass heating is blamed as being an unreliable technology, in the worst case it is then abandoned. Bowland Bioenergy has taken on a number of customers who suffered from fuel supply that was not up to standard and caused numerous boiler malfunctions.

“Start-up costs can also be high as timber has to be bought in, left to dry for many months, processed and delivered before you make any return on the investment. This is where greater business support in terms of grants and advice could be invaluable. Many areas of England are ahead of us in terms of local support to develop this sector.”

Timber

Securing a reliable source of wood was also an early issue, but now the business is well established it has more consistent supplies from organisations like Euroforest and UPM Tillhill. The current requirement is for between 4,000 and 5,000 tonnes of timber per annum to process in the Downham woodyard. But to meet ambitious business goals this will need to expand.

That’s where putting more of Lancashire’s woodlands back to work and producing timber could be vital. A study of woodlands within five kilometres of Burnley town centre commissioned by the Lancashire Woodlands Project revealed that 85 hectares of woods could provide good opportunities for woodfuel thinning, with a further 128 hectares could offering more limited possibilities.

Encouraging more sustainable active management of the



county’s under-managed woods will boost rural jobs and help enterprises like Bowland Bioenergy thrive, whilst achieving environmental gains.

Making a difference

Forestry Commission England runs the EWGS to protect, improve and expand our forests, as set out in the Government Forestry and Woodlands Policy Statement (www.defra.gov.uk/publications/2013/01/31/pb13871-forestry-policy-statement/). EWGS is a part of the Rural Development Plan for England (RDPE). Further information can be found at www.defra.gov.uk/rural/rdpe/index.htm