Fuelling local needs

A fledgling biomass business taking shape on a farm near Kendal has its roots in the founder’s own unsuccessful search for good quality wood fuel.

Kerry Cooper and her partner Andrew Carrie launched Lakes Biomass when they struggled to find high quality, locally grown woodchip to heat their own domestic boiler.

Now the company, which operates from the couple’s farmhouse in Crook, is in the early stages of setting up a supply chain of local wood producers to fuel their planned product range of woodchip, kindling, logs and pellets to customers throughout Cumbria and northern England. They are also looking to recruit up to eight support staff and forestry workers providing a welcome boost for the local jobs market.

Kerry explained:

“We’ve only been operating for a couple of months and we’re not fully trading yet, but we’ve already had calls from potential local customers who are very keen to get hold of good quality wood fuel.

“We heard from one small local hotelier who told us that the hotel boiler kept going out because the wood chip supplied was too wet. Meanwhile, he had a hotel full of guests needing hot water and heating. So judging by the enquiries we have had so far, we can see that there’s a need for a reliable local source of good quality fuel.” The couple first got in touch with Cumbria Woodlands when they swapped their costly oil-fired central heating system for the new wood chip boiler – prompted by rising oil prices and recent cold winters.

Their aim was to work towards self-sufficiency by fuelling the new boiler with wood from a one acre wood on the farm.

Grants

A successful Woodland Improvement Grant application to the Forestry Commission will help them expand and manage their wood, but the couple soon realised that proper management of the wood supply on their doorstep would be a long term project that was unlikely to meet the immediate need to heat their five-bedroom farmhouse.

They started searching for local suppliers – and that’s when the business idea was born. Supported by courses and grant applications managed by the team at Cumbria Woodlands, the business has benefited from around £250,000 in capital grants from the DEFRA Fells and Dales LEADER team, who also provided business development support, to help towards essential equipment and machinery. The project was part financed by the European Agricultural Fund for rural development: Europe investing in rural areas.

But almost as important as the financial support and advice, has been the mentoring offered both informally and at courses such as the Introduction to Wood Fuel and Woodland Management courses run by the Cumbria Wood Fuel School.

Technology

Central to the success of the business is the newly-installed wood drying system which itself is fuelled by a woodchip boiler. Based on technology developed in Austria and Germany, the hot air system has the capacity to dry up to 500 cubic metres of woodchip every two to three days. Logs are dry and ready to use in around five days. The wood drying boiler is eligible for Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) payments helping to support the financial sustainability of the business.

Grants have also helped towards the cost of a Heizohack chipping machine, two tractors to power some of the machinery and equipment for producing firewood and cutting kindling. Lakes Biomass aims to process over 4,000 tonnes of wood over the next three years – and the hunt is on for local woodland owners to supply that demand. Kerry said:

“The quality of wood fuel depends greatly on the moisture content – air dried is more variable than machine dried fuel. Our aim is to have drying facilities that ensure a better quality and more reliably dry product that burns more efficiently.”

Sustainability of supplies is also important as the business aims to source as much wood as possible from managed woodlands in Cumbria or northern England. One of the couple’s long term aims is to develop a “Fuel for Wood” package - Lakes Biomass carry out felling and thinning as part of their woodland management services with the end product delivered back as high quality, dried wood fuel at a reduced price. For Kerry, Lakes Biomass represents more than just a
business. It supports the couple’s interest in woodland as a sustainable resource and aims to encourage unproductive local woods back into work, creating new income possibilities for local suppliers.

It also marks a major career change for Kerry. Born and brought up in Gretna, she gained an MBA before working as a management consultant in London. Her last job before moving permanently to Cumbria four years ago was sales and marketing director for The AA.

“We’ve always had an interest in ecological living. For us the business delivers environmental and economic benefits.”

Cumbria Woodlands Advisory Service

The service offers a key source of advice for owners of undermanaged woodland in Cumbria aimed at bringing more woods into active management. The need to tap this vital sustainable resource and invest in woodfuel was identified in the Cumbrian Local Development Strategy (2008). Both Cumbrian Fells and Dales and Solway Border and Eden LEADER RDPE projects earmarked funding for the initiative. The scheme highlights the potential of woods to reduce heating bills by using local firewood, setting up rural forest-based enterprises, offsetting the effects of climate change and improving wildlife habitats. Three levels of service are offered: an initial free assessment and report (Silver Birch Day), followed by more specialist support under the Oak level service, which can include grant applications and timber mensuration, and a woodfuel and renewable energy assessment, both charged at just 10% of cost. Funding is also provided by client contributions and United Utilities.

Key Achievements

- 475 woodland owners have contacted the service to enquire about help with managing their woods.
- 394 woodland owners signed up for a free advisory visit and report.
- 4208 hectares of woodland visited by advisers.
- 58% of clients accessed further specialist advice (Oak Days for grant applications, timber mensuration, woodfuel assessment).
- 116 applications made to the Forestry Commission’s English Woodland Grant Scheme (EWGS) resulting in projects with a total value of £397,735 declared to date.
- 51 woodfuel reports commissioned.

Skills

Cumbria Woodlands also runs an RDPE funded training scheme ‘Skills for the Forest’. Set up to deliver training to the forestry and farming sector in Cumbria, this £400,000 scheme provides subsidised training to raise the skills of the forestry workforce and to improve the job prospects of woodland workers in Cumbria. The scheme has also upgraded the skills of woodland owners, enhancing their abilities to manage their woods. Key achievements:

- 700 enquiries logged since the scheme began in 2011.
- Six major demonstration events organised, including timber extraction using small scale equipment.
- 337 training places taken up, 73 training courses offered and 841 training days provided (Sept 2011—Dec 2012).