

A Just Transition for the Port Townsend Paper Mill

Jobs and Economic Transition: A Source Under Review

Citizens for Safe Water and Air - Port Townsend

PORT TOWNSEND, WA

This research has been compiled to the best of our ability from named public sources. If you believe any fact presented here is incorrect or incomplete, please contact safewaterandair@gmail.com so it can be reviewed and corrected.

1. Source Information

Title: "A Just Transition for the Port Townsend Paper Mill." Author: John Talberth. Published: December 4, 2025. Source: Center for Sustainable Economy. URL: sustainable-economy.org/a-just-transition-for-the-port-townsend-paper-mill. Date accessed: July 22, 2026.

2. Full Article Text

There comes a time in the life of an aging industrial facility where deliberate planning for its closure, cleanup, and replacement must begin. For the Port Townsend Paper Company (PTPC) mill, that time is now. Take your pick, the problems are proliferating: foul odors, marine organisms smothered by debris or suffocating from nutrient pollution, foam and algal blooms along the shore, occupational health and safety violations, water and air quality violations, and climate pollution and toxins that will be around for a very long time.

Chronic Water Pollution Violations

You can drill down on any one of these and see how bad the news gets. Take chronic violations of the mill's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit. As noted by Scott Doggett in his November 19 opinion piece, "Mill keeps the public in the dark about spill," many of the pollutants the mill discharges in its wastewater are neurotoxins and carcinogens, and several are among the most toxic substances on Earth. He notes that there have been 23 permit violations in the past seven years. These join 148 permit violations or triggers and 51 enforcement actions since 1990.

As Doggett notes in a follow up piece in the Port Townsend Leader on November 26, the paltry fines the Washington State Department of Ecology assesses for these violations have not been raised since the late 1980s and are having little or no effect on incentivizing better behavior.

Air Quality and Health Warnings

Or take air quality. Residents are all familiar with the odors caused by emissions from the settling pond, leaky pipes, and the stack. Measured contaminants include reduced sulfur compounds, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and aldehydes. The sulfur compounds are what causes the smell. According to the Environmental Integrity Project, the mill has been in violation of the Clean Air Act for 11 of the last 12 quarters. In 2024, the United States Department of Health and Human Services

warned that breathing a cocktail of sulfur compounds in air near the mill can cause acute respiratory distress.

The Mill's Climate Footprint

The mill is by far the largest source of climate pollution in Jefferson County. The 2023 facility inventory from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) put the mill's carbon dioxide emissions from burning wood chips and using fossil fuels at 554,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) per year. That is over two and a half times the emissions from the rest of Jefferson County's economy, 207,582 metric tons.

A Proposed Alternative: Non-Wood Pulp

Given all this, a clean replacement facility that keeps all jobs intact and is financially attractive to investors is sorely needed. Otherwise, the argument goes, Port Townsend ends up like Port Angeles, with 200 sudden layoffs and a decades-long toxic cleanup legacy. One option to consider: a state-of-the-art pulp and paper facility located away from the shore that consumes far less water, energy, and chemicals and has a much lower carbon footprint because it uses wheat straw, hemp, kenaf, bamboo, or agricultural wastes from Washington farmers as feedstock rather than wood, virgin or recycled.

It would also generate far less odor since non-kraft pulping processes can be used with these feedstocks. The resource efficiency gains, meaning less environmental impact per ton of product, stem from lower levels of lignin, which makes these feedstocks easier to process. Well-paying union jobs would be involved with dismantling the existing mill and building and operating the new one.

While most non-wood pulp and paper facilities are in China and India, the United States is beginning to catch up as the demand for clean and green products soars. Companies like Genera, based in Tennessee, and Cotrell Paper, based in Massachusetts, are using wheat straw and hemp as feedstock and are using far less water, energy, and chemicals than their wood-based competitors. Here in Washington, Columbia Pulp was the first large scale experiment, one that was designed to use wheat straw feedstock from eastern Washington farmers, but it opened its plant just as COVID hit and had to shut down operations in 2019.

The Tennessee company Genera makes pulp, paper, and packaging from grasses. The article lists the following sustainability benefits:

- Helps conserve at-risk hardwood forests.
- Made from perennial switchgrass and giant miscanthus grass.
- Carbon-negative crops sequester 1.5 tons of carbon per acre per year.
- Low-intensity pulping process has up to 90 percent lower carbon impact compared to common wood pulp, with significantly lower water and energy usage.
- Grasses enrich the soil.

Market and Policy Context

There are several things public officials can do to accelerate a just transition, according to the article. The legislature can undo decades of preferential treatment for wood products and give non-wood alternatives a level playing field. A bill passed by the legislature in 2020 says that clearcutting and industrial wood products are climate solutions, a claim the article says was long ago debunked, but what if non-wood alternatives received this same designation and were rewarded with the same portfolio of tax breaks, subsidies, and public investments now going to the timber industry?

Also, the Washington State Department of Ecology should notify the current owner, Atlas Holdings, LLC, that the current water and air quality permits are the last ones, the article argues. These permits are not worth the paper they are written on if violations and enforcement actions are chronic and doing nothing to protect or improve the air residents breathe or the waters used for fishing, boating, and swimming.

At the City level, the article argues, councilors should impose a bonding requirement that will ensure Atlas bears full financial responsibility for cleaning up the site once it is closed. With \$18 billion in annual revenues, the article states, Atlas can afford this. The Center for Sustainable Economy worked with King County to get a similar risk bonding ordinance in place for fossil fuel facilities that the article says can easily be replicated in Port Townsend.

City councilors and county commissioners could also play a major role by working with state economic development officials and the union to begin the process of recruiting new capital, if Atlas takes a pass, with some public support since the transition serves a public purpose, the article argues. Similar facilities have been jumpstarted by solid waste bonds, new markets tax credits, and section 45X of the Inflation Reduction Act for advanced manufacturing. The market outlook for non-wood facilities is promising: according to Global Growth Insights, cited in the article, the compound annual growth rate for non-wood pulp is forecast to be 6.4 percent through 2034, compared to only 0.81 percent for wood pulp.

The Silence of Elected Officials

So far, elected officials have been silent, the article states. Neither the City nor the County commented on reissuance of the latest National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit. Nor was the mill even mentioned in the 14 candidate statements published in the Port Townsend Leader on October 15. There is a long way to go, the article concludes, but it is time to start.

3. Notes on This Source

The 23, 148, and 51 violation figures (permit violations in the past seven years; permit violations or triggers since 1990; and enforcement actions since 1990, respectively) are secondhand, citing Port Townsend Leader opinion writer Scott Doggett, not a primary regulatory source. A prior log entry from June 28, 2026 cited this same source with different numbers, 149 and 54 instead of 148 and 51, not yet reconciled. Do not treat either version as confirmed until checked against Doggett's original reporting or a primary Washington State Department of Ecology or United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) source.

Update, August 27, 2026: Doggett's original November 19, 2025 column and its November 26, 2025 follow-up (both in his Wild Neighbors column) were located and are now linked as sources 2 and 3,

confirming the correct titles, author, column, and publication dates. Both remain paywalled beyond their opening paragraphs, however, so the specific 23/148/51 figures still could not be directly checked against the original text.

The 554,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide per year figure, drawn from the 2023 United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) facility inventory, and the 207,582 metric ton comparison for the rest of Jefferson County's economy, are also not yet independently verified against a primary United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) source.

Sources and Citations

All factual claims in this document are drawn from the following sources, verified during research for this document.

1. Talberth, John. "A Just Transition for the Port Townsend Paper Mill." Center for Sustainable Economy, December 4, 2025. Available at: sustainable-economy.org/a-just-transition-for-the-port-townsend-paper-mill/ (accessed July 22, 2026). This is the primary source reproduced and reviewed in this document.
2. Doggett, Scott. "Mill keeps the public in the dark about spill. And health risks." Port Townsend & Jefferson County Leader, Wild Neighbors column, November 19, 2025. Available at: ptleader.com/articles/columns/mill-keeps-the-public-in-the-dark-about-spill-and-health-risks/ (accessed August 27, 2026). Cited within source 1 as the basis for the 23 permit violations in the past seven years, and the 148 permit violations or triggers and 51 enforcement actions since 1990 figures. The article's full text is paywalled beyond its opening paragraph, so those specific figures remain unverified against it; see Notes on This Source, below.
3. Doggett, Scott. "Has watchdog turned lapdog at Port Townsend Paper Mill?" Port Townsend & Jefferson County Leader, Wild Neighbors column, November 26, 2025. Available at: ptleader.com/articles/columns/has-watchdog-turned-lapdog-at-port-townsend-paper-mill/ (accessed August 27, 2026). Confirms the article states the state Department of Ecology's maximum daily fine for the mill "hasn't risen a nickel in 38 years," consistent with source 1's "since the late 1980s" framing.
4. Environmental Integrity Project. "A Paper Trail of Pollution," published May 29, 2025. Available at: environmentalintegrity.org/news/pollution-from-the-u-s-paper-industry-is-vastly-under-reported-new-study-reveals/; full report PDF: environmentalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/EIP_Report_PaperTrailofPollution_5.29.25.pdf. Cited within source 1 as the basis for the claim that PTPC has been in violation of the Clean Air Act for 11 of the last 12 quarters. See also this campaign's air quality research file.
5. United States Department of Health and Human Services: cited within source 1 as the basis for a 2024 warning that breathing a mixture of sulfur compounds in air near the mill can cause acute respiratory distress. Specific publication not identified within source 1; a web search on August 27, 2026 did not locate a specific HHS publication matching this claim, so no link is included here. Not independently verified.
6. United States Environmental Protection Agency: 2023 facility emissions inventory, cited within source 1 as the basis for the mill's carbon dioxide emissions figure of 554,000 metric tons per year and the comparison figure of 207,582 metric tons for the rest of Jefferson County's economy. Specific inventory record not identified within source 1; a web search on August 27, 2026 located EPA's Greenhouse Gas Reporting Program (GHGRP) as the likely underlying database but could not confirm the specific facility record or figures (the tool used cannot render EPA's interactive FLIGHT lookup), so no link is included here. Not yet independently verified against a primary EPA source; see Notes on This Source, below.
7. Atlas Holdings, LLC. Press release, "Atlas Holdings Completes a 'One and Done' Closing of Fifth Investment Fund at Hard Cap of \$6.45 Billion," May 5, 2025. Available at: atlasholdingsllc.com/news/atlas-holdings-completes-a-one-and-done-closing-of-fifth-investment-fund-at-hard-cap-of-6-45-billion/ (accessed August 27, 2026; confirms "Atlas manages more than \$16 billion of capital"). The campaign's confirmed source for Atlas's "more than \$16

billion in capital" figure, used in this document to correct source 1's differing "\$18 billion in annual revenues" figure.

8. Global Growth Insights. "Non-Wood Pulp Market" report. Available at:

globalgrowthinsights.com/market-reports/non-wood-pulp-market-106770 (accessed August 27, 2026; the report page shows the same 6.4% CAGR figure cited in source 1, though the currently-published forecast window reads 2026-2035, one year past source 1's "through 2034," and it does not show a separate wood-pulp comparison figure. Market-report vendor pages of this kind are commonly refreshed after initial publication). Market research cited within source 1 as the basis for the forecast compound annual growth rate of 6.4 percent through 2034 for non-wood pulp, compared to 0.81 percent for wood pulp.

9. Port Townsend & Jefferson County Leader. "Voters' Guide," October 15, 2025. Available at:

ptleader.com/stories/voters-guide,230707 (accessed August 27, 2026). Cited within source 1 as the basis for the observation that none of the 14 published candidate statements mentioned the mill; the full guide is paywalled beyond one visible candidate statement, so the full set of 14 statements was not individually re-checked for a mill mention.