



Has the Niche Market for Kitty Litter Reached Saturation?

By Barbara Coyner

While politicians argue the air quality aspects of using woody biomass for green energy, thousands of cat owners have decided that wood-based cat litter definitely improves air quality around the house. A stroll down the cat food aisle at the market shows that there is now usually at least one wood-based alternative to clay litter featured on the shelf. Feline Pine (pine), Good Mews (recycled newsprint), and several other brands show that the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well, even in the realm of cat litter.

86.4 Million Cat Owners Need Litterboxes

With some 86.4 million cat owners in the country, wood-based kitty litter could develop into another regional niche market for woody biomass. Three quarters of U.S. households now own a pet, and pet ownership substantially increases each year. Rumor has it that some people, especially in cities, have decided raising cats is easier than raising children. Others have read the studies claiming that cat ownership contributes to better heart health and general well being.

No matter what the reason, cat ownership usually involves a litter box. And because litter box issues revolve mostly around odor control, wood pellets stack up nicely. Even better, once the pellets are reduced to sawdust in the litter box, they can be recycled to flower beds as mulch. Being biodegradable is a definite selling point for wood pellets.

Boutique to Ordinary

When Ken Simard, president and founder of Feline Pine, started his small company in 1992, he figured he'd hit upon a novel solution for cat litter. Inspired by a friend in the lumber industry, he tested various materials, choosing Southern Yellow Pine as best at absorbing moisture and neutralizing odors. Also, cat litter was made from kiln-dried shavings reclaimed from lumber production, adding environmental brownie points. After patenting the idea, he began selling the product locally, one carload at a time, eventually cornering the market as the best-selling brand of natural cat litter in America.

Cat owners of today aren't limited to boutique style pellets. Chances are your local vet is like mine — thrifty — and sometimes uses ordinary wood pellets designed for pellet stoves.

True, the pellets are a bit bigger than the ones specifically manufactured for cat litter, but in time they break down into sawdust just like the designer cat litter. In my area, pellets are generally made of fir, not pine, but the two species are equally good at battling odor, and the cat doesn't care whether the litter is fir or pine anyway. Two big selling points in choosing ordinary pellets over designer pellets are cost and availability.

Finding that Niche

With much of our domestic pellet manufacturing catering to the overseas heating market, we might nevertheless consider niche market opportunities such as cat litter opening up closer to home. Woody biomass as shavings has already gained respect as horse bedding and lining for hamster and guinea pig cages. But the use of pellets for cat litter, and later as a mulch or compost for non-edibles, indicates once again that there are markets out there for wood waste just waiting to be



explored. Funny as it sounds, area pine forests decimated by pine beetles could conceivably resurface as boutique kitty litter, a formidable challenger to the standard clumping clay litter.

According to various reports, when Feline Pine chose to develop its own manufacturing plant in 2003, it looked to Alabama and its proximity to pine forests. The plant was slated to employ perhaps a dozen people at its inception.

Could this type of business be replicated again in the west on a smaller, more regional scale, or has the kitty litter industry reached saturation (no pun intended)? The process for making pellets is not rocket science, especially when applied to a product not intended for burning. Whereas heating pellets must have some consistency in terms of thermal output, kitty litter just needs to be manageable for the cat.

Waiting Customers

The business formula of using clean wood waste in this manner seems a winner, because eco-friendly products are often sought by conscientious pet owners. In some ways, small scale production seems to be more revered by the eco-conscious who wish to know personally who makes, grows, or harvests their products. Interestingly enough, surveys of pet owners suggest that today's pet owners spend, spend, spend on their cats, indicating that the price of wood-based kitty litter can line up to make a decent profit.

As one national survey pointed out: The majority of pet owners reported that the economy hadn't affected their decision to own a pet; in fact, anywhere from 2 percent to 5 percent of pet owners reported spending more money on their pet than in previous years. There are some estimates that project pet owners spend an average of \$11,000 per pet during its lifetime, even in times of recession.

Of course there's a down side to such a business proposition. Just as it's sometimes hard for the timber industry to convince various politicians that woody biomass qualifies as renewable green energy, it can be equally hard to convince a cat to switch from clay litter to wood pellets. In that regard, it seems herding cats and herding politicians have something in common.