

ENVIRONMENT

Placer County expects tough quizzing on Tahoe power plant

By ED FLETCHER
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Placer County officials are inching forward with plans to build a power plant in the environmentally sensitive Lake Tahoe basin.

Officials expect plenty of tough questions and likely some vocal opposition, but they're convinced the proposed, one-to three-megawatt biomass plant would be good for the local environment.

The plant would run on plentiful wood scraps from nearby forest thinning and maintenance projects.

"There is always someone out there that isn't sure about it," said Brett Storey, the project manager for Placer County. "We try to answer that with information."

As efforts to thin area forests progress, mountains of limbs, wood scrap and brush are left behind. Most of the mate-

rial has routinely been burned or trucked away to a biomass plant 30 miles away.

Storey argues that by building a plant within the Tahoe basin, the impact on air quality from current forest thinning operations would be reduced. Storey said about 30 tons of wood scraps would generate a megawatt of power.

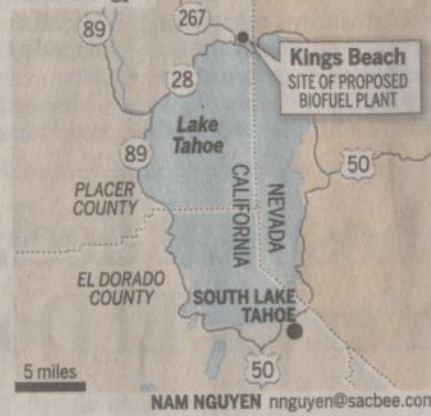
"Instead of (burning it), we can grind that up and make energy out of it," he said.

The biomass process also requires burning, but with dramatically less pollution, Storey said.

Biomass power plants utilize organic materials, in this case tree limbs, pine cones and small trees, to create power - traditionally by heating water through a boiler. The process emits far less pollution than burning the wood out in the open, and the hot water can be used to

PROPOSED BIOFUEL PLANT

Placer County officials are working with a private company to build a biomass plant in the Tahoe basin. Rather than burning waste wood in the open, they hope to turn it into clean energy.



create either biogas or electricity. The hot water byproduct could also be used to melt ice and snow on nearby roads.

If approved, the earliest the project could begin operations would be early 2012. But the timeline doesn't concern Storey; he first wants to make sure the

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Biomass: Grants support project

FAST FACTS

Proposal: A one- to three-megawatt biomass plant at Kings Beach, in the Lake Tahoe basin.

Why: Rather than burning waste wood left behind from forest thinning, plant would turn it into "clean" energy.

What: From October 2007 to September 2008, crews thinned 2,245 acres of land managed by the U.S. Forest Service in the Lake Tahoe basin; an additional 1,692 acres were thinned by prescribed burns.

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community comes around to seeing the project as an asset, not a problem.

He said Placer County officials have already met with the Sierra Club and the League to Save Lake Tahoe. Officials from those groups were not available for comment.

Officials are looking at building the facility on property in Kings Beach owned by NV Energy - the county's private-industry partner in the project.

Although still in the planning stages, the project has already attracted significant government backing. It received federal grants of \$500,000 in 2007, \$1.5 million in 2008 and an additional \$1 million this year.

The project also has backing from state and federal energy agencies, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Forest Service and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"This is a big-ticket item in the environmental improvement program," said Dennis Oliver, spokesman for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, another key oversight agency in the basin.

The plant fits into a larger effort to rid the forest of wood-piles left by forest thinning, Oliver said. TRPA would like to see 125,000 tons of slash left by the thinning turned into fuel, rather than disposed of in controlled burns.

He said the region really got serious about fuels reduction after the 2007 Angora fire.

"By reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfire we are not only protecting life, we are protecting the lake," Oliver said.

Cheva Heck, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Forest Service, said that not all the slash piles can be turned into biomass. But, she said, having a facility nearby could make it more cost-effective for contractors logging on behalf of the Forest Service.

Forest Service contracts with logging outfits don't say how slash piles must be dealt with.

"If we had something in the basin," Heck said, "it would reduce transportation costs and might make it a more attractive option."

Peter Ashcroft, an analyst for the Environmental Defense Fund, said there are reasons biomass makes sense, beyond fuels reduction.

"As a general rule there is a need to diversify our energy sources," Ashcroft said. "Diversity is something that people are pursuing."

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