

As the biomass plant fires forward, let's keep the environment in mind

Momentum is building for a biomass power plant in northern Placer County, and the timing couldn't be better. Before the plant is built, however, rules of engagement between man and forest must be balanced.

The House Appropriations Committee's recent approval of \$500,000 for the county's biomass program comes less than a month after the Angora fire ravaged South Lake Tahoe, destroying more than 300 structures and causing about \$141 million in damage.

The fire was human-caused, but much of the blame for the spreading of the flames can be attributed to poor forest management that left too many trees near too many homes, with plenty of tinder and dry, ground-hugging foliage as the fuse. Add wood-shingled roofs and the unpredictable winds, and the blaze blew up, surging through the forest canopy on its march to the lake.

While a biomass power plant wouldn't prevent forest fires, it could help stem their spread by removing some of the fuel that feeds these catastrophic fires.

The plant, an idea ignited by county Supervisor Bruce Kranz with support from Supervisor Jim Holmes, would transform forest waste from the Lake Tahoe Basin into clean energy. The debris, ground into wood chips, would burn in an emission-controlled boiler that would heat water into steam. The steam would spin a turbine producing energy, both for local needs and back to the grid.

Sites around Truckee and the north side of the lake are being researched, minimizing the transportation of the material. A similar plant, though older and less technologically advanced, has been firing away in Sierra County for nearly two decades.

Currently, much of the region's forest and yard waste is burned in piles, fouling the air and, in time, Tahoe's world-class streams and lakes. A biomass plant could help flip that system around: Forests would be cleaned and managed, reducing the chance for catastrophic fire, while the waste is turned into megawatts for the area's growing energy needs.

But just as there is balance in nature — historically seen through natural fires that kept forests healthy — there needs to be balance in acquiring the material that would drive a biomass plant, should the county proceed with future plant construction. The plant would cost about \$8 million.

Most can agree that debris from defensible space is a natural fuel, as is slash from approved forestry activity and selective decaying material from past burns, such as the Ralston and Red Star fires from recent years.

Tree-thinning practices, often a lightning rod for environmentalists and forestry industry interests, must not be compromised to produce fuel for the plant. With forest management often comes logging roads that can, if built poorly, create erosion and pollution — two feared after-effects of cataclysmic fires.

Mechanical thinning practices should stand on the foundation of maintaining a healthy forest first, including access to crowded stands and types of trees taken. Putting the forest before politics, there should be enough material to make the investment a good one for generations to come.

The Angora fire rang the alarm on what could happen in the Tahoe region if nature and development fall out of balance. Executed correctly, biomass collection and disposal can be one small way to even the scales.