

# Placer biomass plant gets federal funding

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An innovative energy-producing biomass plant in Placer County got a boost of green this week from the federal government.

The plant was one of more than 800 projects earmarked in this year's \$410 billion federal spending bill signed by President Barack Obama on Wednesday.

"It is kind of like a down payment to pay for the technology," biomass plant project manager Brett Storey said of the coming \$1.4 million in federal funds.

The plant, which was two years in the planning, is expected to be built by 2012 in a yet-undetermined site in the north Lake Tahoe region.

Placer's project will provide a clean-burning source for electricity and heat from a renewable energy source. It will convert forest waste from tree thinning and debris from orchards and vineyards into renewable energy.

The plant also will use an internal combustion process equipped with special scrubbers and filters that are expected to eliminate 75 percent to 99.9 percent of the pollutants that would be produced by open burning of the same biomass, Storey said.

Placer County Supervisor Jennifer Montgomery said a biomass plant is a natural fit for the county since it has so much forestland.

"The potential benefits from the technology are far-reaching," Montgomery said.

The benefits include healthier forests, a lower wildfire risk, watershed protection, improved air quality and new jobs, the supervisor said.

Throughout the state, about 30 biomass plants have been located near forest lands so they can be fueled by woody debris. The plants also can be used to burn trees unsuitable for lumber or unsafe to leave standing, but the trees must be ground into small chunks about the size of lemons.

The closest biomass plant to Lake Tahoe is in Rocklin, with a third one near Thunder Valley Casino.

Locating the new plant in the Lake Tahoe region is expected to save in transportation costs and could provide electricity and heat to surrounding communities that now depend upon polluting fossil fuels, Storey said.

Forests are routinely thinned for fire protection, but the debris sometimes is piled and left for as long as 15 years, representing potent fuel for wildfires, he said.

The biomass project, which could cost about \$6 million when completed, is a joint partnership of Placer County and a yet-unnamed Nevada power company, Storey said. The agreement is expected to be finalized by October, Storey said.

The plant will include a two-story building 80 feet long by 80 feet wide, with a covered storage area nearby. Most of the woody material will be trucked out to be ground into chunks and then returned to the plant, Storey said. The process will allow the plant to blend more with its surroundings, he said.

Officials from other counties have been hearing about Placer County's biomass plant and calling for details.

"This past year, we got calls from Amador, Plumas and Butte counties," Storey said. "Everyone is calling."

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