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Recovery and reinvestment: Will biomass study be a boon or bust?

Finding more economically feasible and beneficial uses for woody debris, or biomass, from forest projects is the goal of an agreement between the Plumas National Forest and the Sierra Institute for Community and Environment.

Their cooperative agreement is funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which was passed by Congress to create new jobs and save existing ones, spur economic activity and invest in long-term growth, and foster accountability and transparency in government spending.

The public is invited to a workshop to learn more about this study and potential value-added market-development strategies Feb. 21 in the Greenville Town Hall from 6 to 8 p.m.

The term biomass is used to describe small-diameter trees not generally considered to have value, tree limbs, tops and woody debris from forest projects.

Rather than leaving the biomass behind for burning, which would add to air-quality concerns, much of it can be recovered and utilized for a variety of value-added uses including renewable energy, according to Jonathan Kusel, executive director of the Sierra Institute.

"Biomass has become increasingly important statewide and in Plumas County," Kusel said. "By identifying issues that stymie biomass removal, we can address barriers that when lifted, can pave the way to more utilization opportunities and possibly more jobs."

Kusel hired TSS Consultants, a Rancho Cordova-based firm for renewable energy, natural resource management and financial consulting, to assess a range of alternatives for biomass utilization generated within the upper Feather River watershed.

Together, institute and forest personnel are working on a multi-year project to link hazardous fuels reduction, job creation and healthy forests through the expanded recovery and use of biomass in this upper Feather River watershed region.

The project includes a technical analysis of potential biomass supply in relation to current markets, forest transportation system assessment, innovative transport field trials, identification of policy and other barriers to cost-effective biomass utilization and communication with other local and regional groups considering biomass utilization as a solution.

Consultants at TSS are currently analyzing market information and supply as well as transportation techniques to cost effectively move low-value forest biomass to value-added markets in the region.

Their assessment will confirm and quantify existing local and regional markets, both commercial and niche, for sub-merchantable logs and woody biomass through a variety of methods.

The feasibility study should be complete by mid-February.

"There is an urgent need to bring these stands back into a healthy condition," TSS field manager Bill Wickman said.

Proper biomass treatment will be a proactive way to address both forest and watershed health, he added.

In addition, Kusel and other institute personnel are communicating with a variety of organizations in California that support sustainable job creation in economically distressed areas.

Organizations such as the University of California Cooperative Extension, Sierra Business Council and Plumas Corporation have worked previously to advance biomass utilization in the area.

"We hope to complement their work with these projects," Kusel said. "The Forest Service has also been proactive with promoting value-added biomass utilization projects, so we're in a good position here in Plumas County to achieve our goals."

For project-related documents, reports and status updates, go to sierrainstitute.us, or call 284-1022.

Other sources of information include TSS consultant Bill Wickman at 283-0973, and Plumas National Forest Ecosystems Staff Officer Nancy Francine at 283-7754.