

Mono County receives biomass grant

BY [ANGELA EVANS](#) IN [NEWS](#)

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The Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) awarded Mono County a grant for \$215,000 on Thursday, December 4 to fund a biomass boiler at the Bridgeport County Road Shop. It will be one of the first biomass boilers permitted in all of California and will be a “good case study” for future projects in the State, said Community Development Analyst for Mono County Wendy Sugimura.

The biomass boiler will burn wood waste from forest fuel reduction, timber harvesting, and construction projects, helping the County meet the required diversion rates at the landfill and providing an economic return on the slash, or wood waste, generated from sustainable forest management.

“It’s a clean way to get rid of wood waste,” Sugimura said. “It’s similar to a wood stove but it’s a more controlled environment and you have more complete combustion with less toxins.”

According to the SNC, burning the slash generated by forest fuel reduction projects “in a controlled biomass facility instead of open burning can reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 98 percent.”

A 2012 California Bioenergy Action Plan and accompanying legislation specifies benchmarks for the development of small-scale forest biomass projects over the next 10 years, and the SNC is seen as one of the responsible agencies providing assistance to stakeholders and collaborators “related to the development of community scale forest bioenergy facilities,” their website states.

Mono County originally intended to implement a combined heat and power (CHP) biomass plan in Mammoth. But after conducting a biomass feasibility study last year, consultants from TSS, a renewable energy firm outside of Sacramento, advised thermal only biomass production. CHP biomass systems are an emerging technology “with a lot of risk,” Sugimura said, making financing such a project difficult.

The biomass boiler in Bridgeport will replace the current propane boiler at the road shop—a 12,800 square foot building that currently uses 30,000 gallons of propane a year. Sugimura said the cost of processing, transporting, and storing the biomass, as well as operating and maintenance costs of a biomass boiler, will equal the existing cost of propane to heat the facility.

“We get a really good propane rate and I don’t know why,” she said. “But at the market rate for propane it is saving us tens of thousands of dollars.”

There will be some emissions from the biomass boiler, but they are well under the threshold regulated by the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District, Sugimura said. “We know how many hours we can operate without any impact to public health.”

She expects the project to take up to three years to implement “because it’s a new project for California and certainly a new project for Mono County,” she said. “It’s going to be a hard project for the County to deliver on. But I think we’re up to it.”

There are a variety of factors that will determine the possibility of future biomass projects in Mono County. The cost of propane, or the any other displaced heat source; the proximity to residential areas and density of those areas; and the source location of the biomass, which determines transportation costs, could all make a particular project unviable. Sugimura said Mammoth Mountain Ski Area is “a feasible site” but “it’s a hard project to take on since as a private company they don’t have access to grant funds like the County.”

For now, the Bridgeport project is a good place to start for Mono County. “I think the punch line is we will be using resources we have more efficiently,” Sugimura said. “Instead of considering the things we use in our everyday lives as waste we want to find a way to use them in a productive way.”