

LOCAL NOVEMBER 7, 2016 3:23 PM

# North Fork biomass plant an economic and symbolic step forward, officials say



Ground was broken on the innovative North Fork biomass plant Nov. 3. When operational, the plant will generate enough power for 1,000 homes. **Justine Reynolds** - Submitted Photo

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After several years spent obtaining grants and working through red tape, ground was broken last week on an innovative biomass plant in North Fork that officials say will create jobs and serve as a pioneer facility for the state.

Funded primarily through a \$5 million grant from the California Energy Commission, the plant will be one of the first to use forest-based fuels - including trees killed by drought and the bark beetle - to generate electricity, heat, and biochar, a valuable substance that helps reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere under the state's recently enacted SB 1122 bioenergy law.

"This is an important piece of the puzzle to addressing tree mortality in this area," said Justine Reynolds, project manager. "It's not the 'be all, end all' solution, but it will provide a use for materials that can't be sold or used in any other way, while creating jobs which will provide economic benefits to the community."

The project is a public/private partnership between the North Fork Community Development Council and Phoenix Energy. Operations are expected to begin by the end of 2017, and when running, some five to 10 permanent jobs are expected, as well as another eight to 10 during construction, Reynolds said.

"We're also anticipating a certain number of indirect jobs that will come out of it," she added, noting truck drivers who will haul dead trees to use at the plant.

When operating, the facility will generate around one megawatt of energy - enough to power about 1,000 homes a year - through gasification, a process that bakes the fuels to create gas emissions that generate electricity. Reynolds said the plant is fully permitted to

increase that production to two megawatts, or 2,000 homes a year, but funding is so far unavailable.

“It’s a modular system that will be easy to expand on,” Reynolds said. “So we’ll of course want to provide more power to the community when we can.”

The plant will be located near 34000 Koso Nobe Road, the site of the former logging mill that closed down in 1995 and left dozens of North Fork residents out of work.

District 5 Supervisor Tom Wheeler said it was appropriate the biomass plant would take the mill’s place not only symbolically, but as an economic driver with a focus on renewable energy beyond the tree mortality crisis.

“This is the first big business we’ve had since the mill shut down, so it’s a really huge step for North Fork,” said Wheeler, who lives in the North Fork area. “We’ve been stagnant for 20 years. But we’ve got a lot of positives coming out of this that will hopefully grow even more and make North Fork and the mountains even better.”

The intent of the plant is to hire from within the community, Reynolds said, and Phoenix Energy is looking at ways to develop training assistance for Mountain Area residents.

When operational, researchers from the University of California, Merced will study results from the facility, serving to enhance the field of biomass utilization in another positive for the plant.

Multiple agencies and companies are partners on the project, including: North Fork Community Development Council, Phoenix Energy, Yosemite/Sequoia Resource Conservation and Development Council, The

Watershed Research and Training Center, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, U.S. Forest Service and the Sierra Resource Conservation District.

Details: Justine Reynolds, (559) 877-8663.