



Oakhurst, Madera Co.

## **Biomass energy planned for North Fork**

**Brian Wilkinson**

**May 17, 2012**

The North Fork Community Development Council has an agreement with Reliable Renewables of Houston, Texas, to develop a \$4 million biomass power generation facility on the old mill site on Road 255.

The facility will generate about one megawatt of electricity, enough to power about 1,000 homes according to Elissa Brown, former Madera County grant writer and consultant with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. Brown presented an overview of the project at a recent North Fork Town Hall meeting hosted by 5th District Supervisor Tom Wheeler.

Brown said the power generated by the plant will be used on the old mill site for current and future businesses and for the community. Excess power generated by the plant will be sold to a utility company. Utility companies, by state law, must purchase a certain amount power supplied by renewable sources.

"The project is a strategic step to develop economic uses for forest biomass material generated as a result of forest management tree removal and hazardous fuel reduction in our area," Brown said.

One truck load a day (22 tons) of chipped small-diameter timber and brush from a 30-mile radius would be used to fuel the facility.

Brown said that with the biomass power generation facility, the development council hopes to meet a number of objectives including jobs for area residents, create an income stream for the council to further promote mill site redevelopment and support subsidiary operations such as biomass harvesting, chipping and transportation.

The plant will also produce heat that can be used to dry green wood for gasification and prepare sawdust for pelletizing. The facility will meet stringent emissions standards of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and no waste water will be created.

Although the business model is not finalized, the Community Development Council will provide the land for the project and will share in the economic benefit. Reliable Renewables will arrange for financing and provide the necessary expertise and technology.

At the heart of the plant, according to Zac Scott, managing partner of Reliable Renewables, will be the gasifier that transforms the biomass into methane and hydrogen that runs through a generator to create electricity. The footprint for the building that will house the gasifier will be about 12 by 40 feet and the generator will utilize a building about 20 by 40 feet.

"Our energy centers produce no smoke and discharge no effluent," said Scott. "Placing an energy center near a forest area such as North Fork is economical because shipping biomass long distances, piling slash and thinnings and pile burning are no longer necessary."

"We are excited to work with the community of North Fork and believe biomass generated electricity is a way for communities to use what they produce," Scott said. "We'll also be reducing hazardous fuel in the surrounding area."

Considering financial arrangements, permitting and construction, Scott feels the plant could be in operation in about two years. Although the North Fork plant will be only the second in the United States built by the company, Reliable Renewables has sister companies in Europe and Latin America and have developed 10 plants in Europe.

"What we are doing in North Fork will be the newest version of the technology available," Scott said. "It will be easier to operate and very reliable."

Three similar plants are currently being built in Italy by the company and a plant is under development at a saw mill in Ashville, Mass. that should be in operation within 18 months.

"We've been working years to revitalize the mill site so it's great to see the biomass project moving forward," Wheeler said. "This particular project will create jobs, reduce hazardous fuels and help clean the forest."

Details: [northforkcdc.org](http://northforkcdc.org).