



Fighting fire before it starts

Tahoe Basin projects turn wood chips into biomass

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The small fire that flared up along a path at Granlibakken Resort weeks ago normally would have had General Manager Ron Parson thinking how quickly the flames could lick into the crowns of the trees and explode into an out-of-control blaze.

But Parson, the North Tahoe Fire Protection District, Placer County and the Nevada Fire Safe Council were close to completing a \$85,000 project clearing out dead brush and thinning trees.

“If that fire had happened before, I think the old, dead trees would have gone up too,” said Parson.

The fire was quickly doused, illustrating the value of project even before its completion.

But the work around Granlibakken and another project at Chinquapin are no ordinary thin-and-burn operations.

Instead of being piled into heaps and burned, which foresters say would send a cloud of smoke into Tahoe City, the forest debris will be chipped and eventually hauled to a Loyalton biomass plant to be converted to energy.

Huddled in a circle, as chainsaws growled in the background, the partners talked Wednesday of the innovative forest management project and the growing list of thinning projects that can be a source of biomass fuel.

“Rather than burning the material, we will pay for the chipping and the hauling of it off to Loyalton,” said Brett Storey, Placer County’s new biomass program director. “Our goal

Ryan Salm/Sierra Sun John Perhacs and Ryan Dominguez of the Slide Mountain Hand Crew out of Incline Village chip brush and trees for a defensible space project in Chinquapin.

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is to make this grow beyond Granlibakken.”

North Tahoe Fire Protection District officials are seeing a sliver of the \$439,000 recently received through the help of Congressman John Doolittle, who represents California’s 4th district, being put to work.

“It’s nice to see all levels of government working together,” said the district’s battalion chief, Dave Ruben.

The grant is funding forest thinning on a number of high-danger sites across North Tahoe, and at the same time producing a stream of biomass that is fueling Placer County’s push for a local energy plant run off of forest waste.

The spark that made the project work was the partnership of private and public money to do the thinning.

The area around Granlibakken was recognized as a fire hazard, by both the resort’s owners and the North Tahoe fire district. The resort’s owners, who were already doing thinning work, were the perfect partners to team with on a larger forestry project, officials said.

A similar project, where both homeowners and public agencies have joined forces on forest thinning, is going on in Chinquapin.

“This is great in order to protect structures,” said Placer County Supervisor Bruce Kranz, who is an advocate for biomass in the Tahoe Basin. “My next question is what are we going to do about Forest Service land.”

The stretch of thinned forest, called a “shaded fuel break” is meant to drop a wildfire to the ground, since the space between trees is enough that the fire cannot leap from crown to crown.

The area would aid firefighters working to extinguish a blaze, since the fire would slow and lessen intensity in the thinned forest, said John Pang, fire chief at Meeks Bay fire department.

Where regions such as the Midwest have begun turning their corn crops into the vehicle fuel ethanol, Placer officials are looking to lead the way in tying the much-needed thinning of Tahoe forests to the generation of electricity and other biofuels.

“We are going to push this at a national level to show that Lake Tahoe is leading the way,” said Storey.

The collaboration of agencies from the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency to California State Parks, which has truck loads of chips waiting to be hauled off to Loyalton to become biomass fuel, is helping move the idea forward, said Kranz.

“You can see the unity on this,” Kranz said. “Everybody is interested in protecting Lake Tahoe.”

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