

Forest waste in Central Oregon has potential

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The Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council is launching a wide-ranging study into how debris generated from forest-thinning projects might be put to better use.

Forest managers cut thousands of tons of brush, tree limbs and small trees each year in Central Oregon, primarily to reduce the risk of wildfire. Collectively known as woody biomass, the material can be useful to several industries, but much of it is burned in slash piles during the wetter, cooler months of the year.

Scott Aycock, community and economic development manager for the council, said the organization recently received a \$121,000 grant from the U.S. Forest Service and the Statewide Wood Energy Team.

The money will help the organization find out more about the woody biomass generated in Central Oregon and identify opportunities to connect the materials with companies and organizations that can use it.

In recent years, several companies have proposed biomass-powered electricity-generating plants in Central Oregon, but none of the proposals has gotten off the ground. Aycock said despite the abundance of biomass in the Northwest, power plants are economically challenging, as the region has some of the lowest electricity prices in the country.

Aycock said biomass may be better suited for heating than for power generation in Central Oregon, particularly in places where natural gas service is unavailable. The Deschutes National Forest offices on Bend's west side are heated with wood pellets, as is Sisters High School. Aycock said Mt. Bachelor has completed a feasibility study looking at using biomass to heat buildings at the resort.

Biomass generated in the area is harvested for firewood or shredded or chipped for use in landscaping, animal bedding and power generation.

Brian Tandy, forest products program manager for the Deschutes National Forest, said it's usually up to the contractor hired for thinning to decide whether it will remove the wood from the forest or leave it behind for the Forest Service to burn. He said biomass is a low-price, low-profit margin product, and it is not uncommon for prices to dip low enough that it's not worth the effort to haul it away.

Finding or creating local users for biomass could alter the economics of harvesting biomass or burning it in slash piles, Tandy said. Biomass-fired power plants in California take in much of the material harvested during thinning projects in that state, he said, but the plants are too distant from Central Oregon to provide a market for locally harvested woody biomass.

"If the material's removed, we don't have to burn it," Tandy said. "It reduces the smoke emissions, so utilization is definitely our preferred method."

Aycock said it's difficult right now to get a good estimate of how much woody biomass is being removed from the forest for use by industries and how much is left behind to be burned in slash piles. By working with the

Forest Service, the Oregon Department of Forestry and forest products industry representatives, the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council aims to combine the biomass knowledge of several agencies and groups into a single strategic plan for the region.

“People know what they know, but it’s not all pooled together,” Aycock said.

Aycock said the council earlier this year did some initial research into chemical companies that use biomass. In reaching out to companies, COIC learned many use a fermentation process similar to the process used to brew beer, Aycock said, and some even use the grain discarded by brewers. Industries that need employees familiar with fermentation sciences to create wood-derived chemicals could find Bend an attractive place to locate, he said.

Although the logging and lumber industry is not as prominent as it once was in Central Oregon, Aycock said there’s a sizable community of locals with experience that directly translates to harvesting and processing woody biomass.

“One of the things I like about biomass is, of all the renewable energy sources, it’s something we already kind of know how to do here,” he said. “It’s locally appropriate technology.”

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Joe Kline / Bulletin file photo A forestry technician tends to a pile of burning brush outside Sisters last year. The Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council will be studying whether debris from forest thinning -- woody biomass -- might be used by industries rather than burned.