

## Biomass plant has officials optimistic

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By Dave Frank

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Stan Raddon points at a mound of what looks like a tornado-destroyed home.

Broken pallets, discarded lumber and construction waste.

Then he walks to a small chip pile - the size of a car. It's what he has to turn the mound into.

But making the chips that will be used to fuel an \$8.3 million Carson City plant is not something he or any company can do without a higher pay rate.

"It's drained us here," said Raddon, owner of Carson City Renewable Resource. "It's been really difficult for us."

Costs tied to transportation and production have been the problem. They have kept Raddon and other suppliers from giving the Nevada Department of Corrections the wood it needs to run a plant expected to replace electrical and natural gas energy at the Northern Nevada Correctional Center and the neighboring Stewart Conservation Camp.

The plant, however, has not run more than three days straight since it opened more than six months ago.

But the plant, said Lori Bagwell, department director of support services, is a "very viable project" and will be running full-time within a year.

She acknowledged the plant has had a slow start, but said a \$250,000 grant to the Nevada Division of Forestry for equipment will make it easier to move wood created by forest-thinning projects, bringing in at least one-third of the needed wood.

The division couldn't afford the equipment to move this "biomass" - limbs, underbrush and plants - so the department didn't have the chance to even try to pay for the gas.

The department also will send out a bid request for more wood suppliers, she said, but whether the job will be affordable for either of the companies or the plant is not known.

More money, however, will probably be needed due to miscalculations and the rising cost of fuel.

Bagwell, for instance, has about \$300,000 a year for biomass, and she would be paying Raddon most of that if he could produce all the wood needed for the plant.

The rate new wood providers will ask for, though, will almost certainly be higher than Raddon's rate, she said. Diesel costs the department will have to pay the division of forestry and companies are also expected to rise.

But Bagwell said the biomass plant will eventually be a "nationally-recognized" success, and she feels comfortable talking about it because she has nothing to hide and no one to blame.

"I refuse to throw anyone under the bus," she said.

But Bagwell herself is one of the only officials left who initially advocated the plant in 2004 and is still working on it.

The corrections director during the planning stage, Glen Whorton, has retired and declined to comment. The members of the Nevada Board of Examiners, who approved the money for the project in 2005, have moved to other jobs or have retired.

Several calls and e-mails by the Appeal to the office of Rep. Dean Heller, one of the board members, were not returned.

The facilities manager at the prison has also retired. The original project team from Phoenix-based APS Energy Services, the company who proposed and built the plant, is gone.

The U.S. Forest Service, which owns most of the biomass-rich land near the city, has praised the idea of the plant, but has also given conflicting information about it.

Ed Monnig, forest supervisor of Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, was one of the few who warned about the plant's potential problems, but Dr. Marcia Patton-Mallory, the Forest Service's national biomass coordinator, released a report in February that said the opposite.

"Woody biomass generated from forest thinning had been transported to a landfill on a route that went past the prison," her report said. "Using these materials for the wood-fired biomass boiler will not only save transportation costs but also avoid having to dispose of biomass in a landfill."

Monnig told plant supporters at the opening of the plant in September that costs could be a problem because the Forest Service didn't have the money to take the wood to the prison.

Patton-Mallory said she got her information for a regional director based in Utah, but he could not confirm the information.

These things will be a "challenge," according to Patton-Mallory, but the plant's technology is proven.

"This is one I think is going to be successful," she said. "But it's just working out the details about how to make it successful."

Bill Carlson, chairman of the USA Biomass Power Producers Alliance, said it is rare for a biomass plant project to be completely abandoned, but problems at the beginning are "somewhat typical."

Transportation costs can be one of these problems, he said, and diesel right now is a problem even for currently successful plants.

Biomass plants can be hit by economic forces they can't control, he added.

California, which now has the most biomass plants in the country, closed half of its plants in the mid-1990s because of a slowing forest product industry.

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Photos by Cathleen Allison/Nevada Appeal [Click to Enlarge](#)  
Stan Raddon, with Carson City Renewable Resource, sprays down the dust as a separator screens and sorts the different sizes of chips created from wood waste.

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Carson City biomass plant developers will have to deal with the cost of rising fuel costs, but it won't be enough to stop the plant from opening as soon as this summer, according to an independent engineer working on the project.

Richard Minetto, who is contracted with APS Energy Service to review the plant's performance, said the plant will be a success if it can hire multiple suppliers and make other adjustments such as adding on-site storage for wood.

APS Energy Services acknowledged that wood quality and quantity are problems now, but said building the plant was the best decision at the time and the project will be successful.

But Raddon, who continues to lose money trying to provide the wood, said the plant can't operate without spending more money.

"I'd love for it to happen," he said, "but I haven't seen it in four years."

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