

Plan would produce biomass at Tahoe

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Emma Garrard/
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Service file photo
Jake McDermott
spreads wood
chips around an
athletic field at
North Tahoe
Regional Park last
fall. A large
industrial chipper,
known as a tub grinder,
may be stationed this
summer at the park, where it will shred forest
waste into wood chips to be burned at a biomass
plant in Loyalton.



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TRUCKEE, Calif. - A high-priority forest-thinning project on an 80-acre plot of land just above Dollar Hill may bring the Lake Tahoe Basin one step closer to biomass-energy production this summer.

The North Tahoe Fire Protection District plans to treat 65 acres of the North Tahoe Public Utility District's Firestone property, which sits between the Old County and Highlands neighborhoods just east of Tahoe City.

Because the Firestone property is next to two prominent neighborhoods, it is the North Tahoe Fire District's second-highest priority for fuels reduction, as rated in its Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

"Our goal here is to not only create a fire-safe situation, but to leave a healthy functioning and ecologically stable stand of trees," said Stewart McMorrow, the fire district's forest fuels manager.

In return for the fire district's fuels reduction and forestry work on their property, the North Tahoe Public Utility District is working with the fire district and Placer County to host a biomass pilot project at its regional park in Tahoe Vista.

A large industrial chipper, known as a tub grinder, may be stationed at the North Tahoe Regional Park this summer where it will shred the forest waste into wood chips. The chips then will be loaded into trucks and transported down to a biomass plant in Loyalton.

The pilot program will provide a centralized location within the Tahoe Basin for forest waste to be dropped off and processed for biomass, said Placer County Biomass Manager Brett Storey.

It will also give officials an on-the-ground perspective of exactly how much fuel Tahoe forests can yield for biomass, Storey said.

"I think we know that we have enough to sustain a certain size of the biomass plant," Storey said. "But now we really want to get down to what is already out there that can be captured."

Crews tentatively are scheduled to begin work on the Firestone property starting Aug. 15. The work will be mostly done by machine, which is cheaper and more efficient, McMorrow said. But low-growing brush and smaller trees growing on the property's stream environment zone and on steeper slopes will be removed by hand.

The most intense thinning will be within a 300-foot zone of the residences that border the property. Crews will create what is known as a shaded fuel break, McMorrow said, which is designed to stall a wildfire before it reaches urban areas, and vice versa, to defend the forest from urban structure fires.

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