
Turning WASTE into WATTAGE

Millions in federal funding proposed for biomass, Tahoe environmental projects

BY BY KAREN MCINTYRE

SIERRA SUN,

Lake Tahoe's goals to become more energy efficient, less flammable and have cleaner water are closer to being attained thanks to millions of federal dollars proposed in the 2009 Energy and Water Appropriations Bill.

The more than \$33-billion bill, approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee last Friday, still must go through the Senate, House — which could change its value — and be signed by the president. If passed, more than \$5 million will help fund a number of the lake's vital projects.

"Lake Tahoe is the crown jewel of California," U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein said in a release. "But the Lake Tahoe Basin faces numerous threats, including the constant danger of catastrophic wildfire due the thousands of dead and dying trees in the region. The clarity of the lake's crystal blue waters has also been affected by soil erosion and runoff.

"So, the millions of dollars of funding included in this appropriations bill will provide a much-needed federal hand of assistance to ensure the long-term health of Lake Tahoe and its surrounding forests."

The bill includes \$3 million for Tahoe Basin Restoration, \$500,000 for the Lake Tahoe Coordination Study and \$125,000 for Tahoe Regional Planning.

But perhaps the most significant approval for the Tahoe area is the \$1.5 million for the Placer County Biomass Facility.

The biomass facility will be used to produce energy from hazardous fuels cleared from area forests. This will reduce the fire risk by collecting brush that sits on the forest floor from Meeks Bay to Incline to Truckee and save the county money spent hauling some of the hazardous fuels by diesel truck to Loyalton to be treated.

"This facility is a win-win for Lake Tahoe," Feinstein said.

In addition to clearing the forest of flammable material and producing power, the process would reduce smoke produced from control burns and reduce air pollution.

"We're trying to kill a bunch of birds with one stone," said Brett Storey, Placer County's biomass project manager.

Storey is working closely with Placer's 5th District Supervisor Bruce Kranz, who he said "led the way" for this project.

Possible sites for the facility are the Placer County Sheriff's substation on Burton Creek Road or in Kings Beach maybe on National Avenue. The facility is expected to produce between 1 and 3 megawatts of electricity, Storey said. A 3-megawatt plant could power 2,000 homes.

In December, county officials announced they would receive almost \$500,000 to fund research for the wood-chip power plant, which is planned to be completed in 2012. This \$1.5 million is the last piece of federal funding the county was asking for, Storey said. The rest will come from state and local funds. The proposed project could cost \$9 million to \$10 million.

Storey said the county is thrilled that Sen. Feinstein thought this project was worthy, but Feinstein's spokesman Scott Gerber said this is a contentious year for appropriations and is it unclear what will happen with the money.

If the county does not receive the money this year, Storey said it will hopefully get it next year. But there is "great possibility we could get it this year," he said.

The recently approved federal funding allows the Army Corps of Engineers to participate in the Lake Tahoe Federal Interagency Partnership, which is designed to implement the \$2.5 billion Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program to protect the natural, recreational, ecological and economic resources of the Basin, according to the release. Much of this funding will be spent on projects such as Upper Truckee River watershed restoration, Blackwood Creek watershed restoration, initiating construction on Incline Creek restoration and continuing storm water master planning activities, Angora Fire restoration and efforts to curtail aquatic invasive species.

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