

Ione plant's green conversion on hold



Mike Shively, up, talks about the turbine engine during a tour of the old coal-powered plant that is being converted to burn biomass. The Buena Vista Biomass Power plant is along Coal Mine Road in the Mother Lode in Ione. Calixtro Romias/The Record

By Dana M. Nichols
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IONE - A plan to create dozens of new jobs and generate electrical power by burning small-diameter wood waste from area forests is on hold until at least next year while Amador County officials study concerns over greenhouse gas emissions and traffic.

Amador County will do a full environmental impact report on the Buena Vista Biomass Power project, which is converting a former coal-fired plant on Coal Mine Road near Ione to burn wood chips. That means the plant, which had been scheduled to begin taking forest trimmings this spring, won't begin operating until January at the earliest, Amador County Planner Nathan Lishman said.

Amador officials announced the decision to do a full environmental report March 16.

If you go

Amador County planning staff will hold a public meeting to hear comments on what should be considered in a full study of the environmental impact of converting the Buena Vista power plant

to burn wood chips. That meeting will be 2:30 p.m. March 31 in the Amador County Board of Supervisors chambers, 810 Court St., Jackson.

Information: (209) 223-6380

Government officials, private business owners, environmentalists and others in Calaveras and Amador counties hope that the Buena Vista plant will become part of a new "green" economy by providing an economic way to dispose of wood waste that should be removed from forests to maintain forest health and prevent catastrophic wildfires.

Brian Sanders, a representative for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, has been part of the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group, a public-private coalition working to rebuild the forestry industry in the region. Sanders said small local contractors had already signed agreements to supply material to Buena Vista.

"They were prepared to deliver the product," Sanders said.

Sanders said the U.S. Forest Service has not yet signed anticipated long-term stewardship contracts that would use the Buena Vista plant to dispose of material trimmed from the forest.

Proponents say that not only will the wood-burning version of the plant generate much less pollution than did the coal-burning version that operated before 2001, but that it also gives foresters a less-polluting alternative to open burning of slash piles left after logging in area forests.

The plant would generate 18 megawatts of electricity, enough for 16,000 homes, by burning about 210,000 tons of woody biomass fuel.

The Center for Biological Diversity sent a letter in February challenging the claim that the plant is carbon neutral and questioned calculations for how much pollution it would generate. That letter, in part, was what prompted Amador officials to conduct a full environmental study.

Kevin Bundy, a senior attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said many factors determine whether a biomass plant results in a net increase in carbon emissions.

"Once that infrastructure goes in, we are not just looking at slash piles. We are looking at pressure to start logging to burn," Bundy said.

Privately, those involved with the Amador-Calaveras Consensus Group say there is no intention to harvest large logs for fuel here. In fact, a Calaveras County program has even retrained former loggers in how to thin the brush and other small-diameter materials whose removal can restore forest health.

Because the Buena Vista plant is one of the first of many proposed in California to seek approval, the case is being watched as a potential precedent-setter.

"There is a tremendous push right now to build more biomass plants in California and the rest of the country," Bundy said.

Buena Vista Biomass Power spokesman Jesus Arredondo did not respond to a message Monday asking for comment.

Lishman said that Buena Vista officials tell him they plan to continue work on the plant's conversion and to do what is necessary to move the environmental impact study along promptly.

In addition to studying the plant's impact on greenhouse gas emissions, the environmental impact report also will consider the effect of the 40 large tractor-trailer trucks that will deliver material each day.

It happens that the Buena Vista Biomass Power plant is next to a site at which a casino is planned by the Buena Vista Rancheria of Me-Wuk Indians.

"We wanted to see some analysis of potential conflict between trucks and casino patrons," Lishman said.