

Connecting the Dots: Wildfire, Forest Health, and Sustainable Rural Economies

**Notes from the Webposium Visalia Regional Discussion
October 29th, 2009**

Hosted by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy

VISALIA

Attending: Jim, Mike, Kerri, Ilma, Bobby

1. From the morning panel discussions, what resonated for you?

- Anyone engaged in this conversation has heard this information
- This was new information for some and helpful for getting up to speed on this subject
- There was not that much benefit to watching the panel presentation live, so participants could have had the video streamed before hand and watched it at a more central location.

2. What is your vision of success?

3. What is our “starting point for action”?

Locally, there is not the same amount of forested private land as the central and northern Sierra. To do a biomass project on private lands, would be a challenge and unsustainable. In this region, there is only one mill - Sierra Forest Products (Terra Bella). Therefore covering the costs of transportation for biomass is tough and makes it economically infeasible.

4. What are the barriers or hurdles to overcome?

- Litigation: One project (Sawmill) was appealed because of the inclusion of larger trees in the sale. Now that stewardship contracting is available, the project may be able to move forward. Biomass is also becoming more of a viable option. The USFS has been repeatedly appealed when trying to implement tree harvesting greater than 20”, so we will not be counting on harvesting greater diameters. .The 10% disagreement can take 90% of your efforts to overcome and prohibit progress from moving forward.
- Capacity: We lack adequate infrastructure such as biomass facilities. Existing facilities are too far away and new ones are unlikely to be built soon.
- Funding: The USFS does not have enough funding to do large scale restoration. They can only accomplish 2000 to 5000 acres per year; and need external funding to increase that capacity. Marijuana grow sites also need restoration, but not enough funding exists to complete restoration. Funding is a big problem for the Tule Tribe too since funding for natural resource departments is through grants.
- Coordination across jurisdictions: The Western Divide District project has been coordinating with the Tule Tribe on thinning projects and the Monument Plan. With respect to the Monument, they are asking what the FS can do to protect watershed benefits affecting the Tribe.

5. What level of planning needs to go into these goal/activities?

Project planning steps

- *Project idea development* and/or research - Find successful examples/people to talk to
- *Regional or local policy* does not allow project - Existing management plans or policies that would impact project (including litigation)
- *Project capacity assessment* -
- Staffing/expertise (Example: volunteer-based organizations might be spread too thin to develop idea)

- Physical Resources (Example: no available sawmill facility or equipment, training)
- Project location
- Funding Sources (Example: in-kind support or grant funding, etc)

Pre-Project Due Diligence/Research

- *Permitting* (CEQA and NEPA review as well as related permits)
- *Stakeholder outreach* (Example: not enough stakeholders)

6. What projects are going on currently or in the past? On the Sequoia National forest:

- Sawmill plantation thinning - in the South Greenhorn Mountains. It's a 30 year old plantation that needs thinning and has good biomass potential since the trees are too small to make boards. It's a community protection project in an old burn area (Red Mountain) and is not far from Terra Bella. It is a possible stewardship contract/biomass opportunity (750 acres).
- Sawmill- is a thinning project that could produce saw logs and biomass in same location (1200 acres).
- Breckenridge - These are small plantations in the Breckenridge Mountains with biomass and stewardship contracting possibilities (1400 acres).
- Ponderosa - is a thinning around a community above Porterville that is currently under contract. The contractor cannot find a market to sell the material so the FS is going to have to burn the materials. There is currently no mechanism to bring the products to market (1200 acres).
- Delilah Terrace is a completed thinning project on lands planted in the early 60s'. Trees were cut, and decked next to a road, but no parties are interested in taking the small diameter ponderosa pines. Now that a subsidy is available, the Forest Service has gone to Terra Bella and asked them to pick it up.

The biomass plant in Dinuba was donated to Fresno State and closed. It was formally a cogeneration plant, but closed at the same time as the sawmill.

What are the reasons for success or failure of a biomass facility nearby? What is the potential for establishment of a new local biomass or wood products facility?

- Funding: Biomass grants are available to support small efforts. Many of these grants require a feasibility study to have been conducted first. In other words, the grant requirement is shovel ready. Economic analysis needs to be completed. The economic development council needs to be involved in purchasing a portable cogeneration facility.
- Air quality concerns - The USFS has discussed emissions reductions from smaller, controlled burns as opposed to catastrophic fire emissions. The Air Board did a release a policy paper that supports prescribed burning.

The Tule Tribe does thinning, but they are constrained by air quality concerns. The Tribe does not have a way to get the material off the forest. Biomass opportunities are possible, but the scoping work has not been completed. If the Tribe had a biomass facility, then some of the USFS projects could potentially flow to the Tribe. If an excess of electricity was produced, the Tribe could potentially flow it into the "Grid." Many of the other communities such as Camp Nelson could also potentially use the tribal facility, if it were constructed. Typically, the cut off for

economical transportation to a small facility is 50 miles on paved roads, and the issue has to do with time and road access.

7. Who here today can contribute to developing local collaboration?

Local collaboration is already ongoing.

8. Who is missing from today's discussion?

- The Tulare Resource Conservation District and other RCDs
- Industry representatives
- Sierra Forest Products (Terrabella)

Many folks couldn't find the means to attend in part due to the travel time

9. What are the next steps?

- Outreach: Outreach is needed to bring groups to the table to resolve differences. The USFS Sawmill project is going forward and looking for stakeholders to provide feedback. They are contracting with a facilitator to help with outreach. Participants at the meeting will help with getting participation.
- Feasibility study: A first step is to get a Council level decision to conduct a feasibility study that would evaluate other entities that may use or be affected by a facility. Both the Tribal Council and Economic Development would need to be involved in this type of effort.
- There were issues with providing the appropriate technical facilities to do this web meeting. Future webinars could be held at California Edison near the Agriculture Center.

Are there resources that this community needs that the SNC or partners can provide?

- Facilitation - The Sierra Nevada Conservancy can be involved with the outreach contractor on the USFS Sawmill project.
- Funding: The SNC could work to help find appropriate grants or fiscal agents (e.g. Tulare RCD or Fire Safe Councils) or in helping to write a grant. The feasibility study could potentially be an SNC grant.