



**Eastern Sierra Council of Governments (ESCOG)
Joint Powers Authority**

2025 Biomass Utilization Project Summary and Recommendations

To: ESCOG Joint Powers Authority
From: Stacy Corless, Stacy Corless Consulting
Christiana Darlington, California Law Empowering
Renewable Energy (CLERE)

Summary of Project Results and Recommendations

"We are beyond yes" – Mono County Supervisor/ESCOG Board Member Paul McFarland

"We have to look at this from a regional perspective" – Inyo County Supervisor/ESCOG Board Member Trina Orrill

"We have to start taking ownership" – Mammoth Lakes Town Councilmember/ESCOG Board Member John Wentworth

On October 22, 2025, the Eastern Sierra Council of Governments board voted unanimously to add regional biomass utilization to its Sustainable Recreation and Ecosystem Management program, which includes a major focus on wildfire resilience. This action formalizes clear board direction to have the ESCOG lead regional efforts to support biomass utilization development in Inyo and Mono Counties.

Comments from board members at that meeting highlight the need to elevate biomass as a regional issue, beyond any single project or initiative.

Based on the sense of urgency expressed by ESCOG board members, the recommendations in this report include using existing funding to support additional staff or consultant capacity to continue biomass convenings that took place in summer-fall 2025.

A consistent theme across the three biomass-focused meetings was the need for information-sharing and building a common understanding of challenges and opportunities in addressing how to manage the proliferation of woody material from fuels reduction efforts as the Eastern Sierra increases wildfire resilience activity. This convening role for

ESCOG can be integrated into and developed through ESCOG's current work in the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance.

At the October ESCOG meeting, the board also gave direction to work with Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance partners to pursue state block grant and other funding to support biomass recommendations beyond convening. ESCOG's presence and leadership in the Wildfire Alliance strengthens the Eastern Sierra region's position in a competitive statewide funding environment. With additional funding and staffing, ESCOG should produce what other biomass pilot program regions have called an "Entity Action Plan" to guide its role in regional biomass utilization.

Background

A necessary component of creating wildfire-resilient communities and landscapes is determining what to do with the wood and green waste—the biomass—that results from vegetation thinning and removal projects.

As planning and implementation for fuels reduction and community defense projects ramp up across the Eastern Sierra, there is heightened need and interest in biomass utilization. ESCOG could provide critical support to fuel reduction projects by helping the region manage the wood waste residues left behind from fire hazard reduction work. This waste residue can undermine the effectiveness of fuel reduction projects if left in place, as well as emit methane and, if openly burned, produce smoke that could limit the ability to conduct prescribed fire. Increased amounts of wood waste could also strain the capacity of local landfills.

In early 2025, ESCOG Executive Director Kabala was asked if ESCOG might be willing to convene discussions among biomass utilization interests. As ESCOG staff and board members engaged in biomass utilization issues, they became aware of a state "biomass pilot" program through the California Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI), serving other parts of the Sierra Nevada. This program examined potential roles of Joint Powers Authorities in biomass utilization development and management.

With ESCOG's support, LCI made a small subgrant to two consultants for the "biomass pilot" program—Christiana Darlington of CLERE, Inc. and Stacy Corless Consulting LLC (as a subcontractor to CLERE)—to work with ESCOG. This project investigated current challenges and opportunities for biomass utilization in the Eastern Sierra, and whether ESCOG might serve as a regional governance entity for biomass utilization and potentially apply for future state funding to establish this role.

Meetings and project activities conducted by the two consultants took place from late June through October 2025, and funding for this project concluded at the end of that year.

Meeting Activities/Outcomes

Agencies and Organizations Represented: ESCOG staff and board members; Inyo County; Mono County; Town of Mammoth Lakes; Bishop Paiute Tribe; CAL FIRE; Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI); Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC); University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources; Inyo National Forest; biomass project proponents West Biofuels and GC Forest Products; Whitebark Institute; California Deer Association; TSS Consultants.

June 25, 2025: Presentation to ESCOG Board: Outlined "biomass pilot" program, alignment with state wildfire task force goals, and short-term opportunities to explore challenges and opportunities in the Eastern Sierra, including how regional JPAs can support biomass utilization. Partner Meeting 1: Established the need for a shared understanding of the biomass utilization landscape in the Eastern Sierra and project status; GC Forest Products gave a project update outlining frustrations with and needs for project development.

August 6, 2025 / Partner Meeting 2: West Biofuels and TSS bioenergy project updates; Whitebark Institute presented an updated biomass feedstock assessment (within the ESCCRP project area) confirming availability of material for a bioenergy facility. Inyo NF presented its five-year program of work, which supports the feedstock assessment.

October 3, 2025 / Partner Meeting 3: State context presentation from LCI; funding update from SNC; presentation from the Central Sierra Economic Development District on its role in the Southern Central Sierra "biomass pilot" project, focusing on workforce and economic development; discussion of needs and potential ESCOG roles in regionalizing biomass utilization development.

October 22, 2025/ ESCOG Board Meeting: The ESCOG board confirmed its interest in supporting biomass utilization development. Board members recognized the importance and urgency of biomass utilization solutions to the region's overall wildfire resilience. The board directed staff to continue representing ESCOG in the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance,

Recommendations and Next Steps

ESCOG's engagement in biomass utilization development supports both regional wildfire resilience and economic development. This aligns with and provides synergistic opportunities alongside other ESCOG projects, such as California Jobs First and the Eastern Sierra Pace and Scale Accelerator. Specific recommendations and ideas that emerged from the series of meetings and other "biomass pilot" projects are listed below. Many activities are contingent on funding for additional staff and/or consultants. Other regions in the LCI "biomass pilot" group have estimated \$200,000–\$300,000 in annual costs to support similar activities.

The primary short-term recommendation is for ESCOG to continue its leadership role in the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance and through that role (leaning into efficiencies and shared

interests of fellow ESWA partners) continue bringing biomass partners together to share information.

Step 1: Convene Current Biomass Interests and Stay Active in Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance

This project has demonstrated a need for a communication forum for biomass interests. Convening is an important first step; regular updates and discussions build greater understanding and awareness. ESCOG is well positioned to bring parties together, as a regional Joint Powers Authority with a program that includes wildfire as part of ecosystem management. Convenings and discussions can continue to build understanding of the complex ecosystem required to support biomass utilization and bioenergy projects.

- **Grow Convening Capacity through Existing Grants:** The ESCOG board gave clear direction to continue biomass-focused meetings, though current convening capacity is limited by staffing constraints. Funding for additional support staff and/or consultants should be built into the near-term work program for ESCOG's Community Wildfire Defense Grant, which has a biomass utilization component, and other active grants. Inyo and Mono Counties should add to regional wildfire resilience staff capacity by applying to the California Fire Safe Council's County Wildfire Coordinator Program to backfill the positions of the current county wildfire coordinator, whose work will be funded through the Community Wildfire Defense Grant. If the counties' administrative capacity is too limited to apply for the grant and to manage the coordinator program, ESCOG should support applications and consider housing these positions in ESCOG, which would lead to aligned workstreams and efficiencies.
- **Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance Leadership:** ESCOG should continue and potentially grow its leadership role in the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance to support biomass utilization as a component of regional wildfire resilience. Biomass convenings should be part of the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance's planned 2026 activities, led by ESCOG staff, and potentially as an ad-hoc ESCOG board committee. There are 4 members of the current ESCOG board who participate in Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance meetings; board member ESWA participation could be formalized through an ESCOG board committee assignment.
- **Biomass Utilization Information Hub:** Create a library/information hub (potentially housed on the ESCOG website) of reports, documents and presentations already collected through this project, and update as information sharing continues.
- **Policy and Issue Advocacy:** Part of convening could be to align regional interests for local state advocacy on policy and regulatory issues, such as the pending expiration of the BioMAT program. Another urgent issue raised by ESCOG board members is the impact of increased community defensible space programs on county landfills.
- **Tribal Engagement:** ESCOG should invite partnership with the Bishop Paiute Tribe. Tribal representatives have expressed interest in regional biomass utilization. An

invitation to participate in convenings could be extended to staff and Tribal Council, as well as the Bishop Paiute Development Corporation.

Step 2: Action Plan to Regionalize Biomass Utilization – Contingent on Funding

When ESCOG receives funding to support deeper engagement in biomass utilization, the scope of work should include development of an Entity Action Plan (a term used in other biomass pilot regions) that further investigates the feasibility of regional biomass utilization and outlines opportunities and challenges for ESCOG engagement. Objectives for the plan will be informed by continued discussions with current biomass utilization partners and interests. Some additional activities for inclusion in the plan are:

- Expanded feedstock assessment: Current understanding of biomass amounts (feedstock availability) is focused on the Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Resilience Project (ESCCRP); ESCOG could broaden the focus to address needs and opportunities beyond that project (such as implementation of the Community Wildfire Defense Grant) while continuing to support ESCCRP.
- Development of a regional bio- or stewardship economy, rooted in the region's history and addressing ongoing needs for landscape restoration. This could include continued engagement with Sierra Jobs First partners Eastern Sierra Business Resource Center, Cerro Coso Community College, and the Central Sierra Economic Development District/Motherlode Job Training Center to support biomass/bioeconomy business and workforce development and training programs.
- Potential biomass business development support programs. Examples from other pilot programs include:
 - Data and mapping: Ensure data continuity and accurate feedstock availability by tracking sources of wood residue in the region; implement the state's Biomass Digital Marketplace program.
 - Contracting: Provide feedstock supply contract templates that strengthen lending and financing for woody residue utilization projects and assist with contract negotiation and management between businesses.
 - Grant support: Seek funding to assist businesses with start-up or expansion costs for vehicles and equipment.

Future Funding Opportunities

The state funding outlook has changed since the ESCOG first took up the issue of biomass utilization in June 2025 and is likely to stay in flux. Grant funding to continue the "biomass pilot" program is no longer anticipated through LCI. There is no specific grant for which ESCOG could apply today to fund its work on biomass. However, Proposition 4 allocations in the state's 2025–26 budget include promising opportunities for funding to continue building wildfire resilience in the Eastern Sierra. This funding could potentially support biomass utilization development as part of a larger regional block grant. The primary

recommended approach for funding for ESCOG's support of regional biomass utilization is through Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance's efforts to seek regional funding through Sierra Nevada Conservancy. Other funding opportunities from other state departments and agencies (such as CAL FIRE and Department of Conservation) through Prop 4 could emerge in 2026.Pr

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy's Landscape Grant Program (LGP) is the agency's current funding program created to address large-scale, multi-faceted regional wildfire resilience needs.

About SNC's Landscape Grant Program (LGP)

- From SNC's website: "The LGP will integrate federal and state-level strategies, data, and tools with landscape-level prioritization, planning, and expertise to accelerate high-impact forest restoration and wildfire resilience initiatives. Contingent on funding received, SNC will award landscape grants to fund partnerships serving large, ecologically defined landscapes to implement project portfolios over 5–10 years."
- There is \$45 million allocated to SNC in the 2025–26 budget through Prop 4 for regional projects that could fund SNC's Landscape Grant Program.
- SNC considers the Eastern Sierra (through the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance) one of 16 "ready landscapes" in the Sierra-Cascades region eligible for this funding. Funding for ESCOG to serve as a biomass utilization convener could be part of this regional project funding through Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance.
- Guidelines for this funding go to the SNC board for approval in March or June 2026, after which the program will open (no details yet on exact timing or funding amounts). This is a directed grant program, meaning there will likely be no traditional application—SNC staff will direct and award funding based on board-approved guidelines.