

Draft letter to BOF regarding biomass processing facilities in critical rangeland and forested areas in California

Members of the Board of Forestry,

As you are certainly aware, biomass processing facilities serving forested and brushland areas in the state have been struggling for some time. Interest groups from these areas across the state have expressed concern over the potential loss of these facilities, especially at a time when the amount of dry woody material is accumulating to critical levels as a result of drought and beetle infestation. Environmental and regulatory restrictions in use of prescribed burning for removing these fuels are creating significant concerns about hazards presented to landscapes in many communities.

While much discussion about the utility of biomass processing plants has focused on their power generation potential, another significant value is their ability to aid in resource management. Members of RMAC feel that proactive resource management is key to minimizing and mitigating threats to healthy ecosystem function. One rapidly growing threat is that of heavy fuel loading, especially in WUI areas. We find the idea of a strategically organized network of biomass processing facilities attractive as a component of resource management in the state. We recognize the fact that these facilities have not generally been economically viable without public support. However, we think that the “viability” of these facilities needs to be viewed in ways which include what they can contribute to fuels management and landscape productivity. If the costs of wildfire suppression and rehabilitation, and losses to forest and rangeland productivity were to be included, these facilities may demonstrate a far greater public value than has been recognized.

Biomass specialists with the University of California have argued that prospects for improving that viability may exist, but research to develop them has not been supported to the level required (Mayhead and Tittmann, 2012). We would like to encourage UC specialists to develop a means of valuing the realistic economic contributions of biomass processing facilities to the state budget in managing wildland resources. If that provides evidence of real economic benefit, the next step we would propose is to identify geographic areas that would show the most benefit from properly developed biomass facilities and work with the state legislature to find the means to support them.

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