



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

**STAFF REPORT**

**To:** ESCOG Joint Powers Authority

**From:** Stacy Corless, Stacy Corless Consulting  
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Renewable Energy (CLERE)

**Subject:** 1) Confirm ESCOG’s interest in supporting regional biomass  
utilization development as part of ESCOG’s Sustainable  
Recreation and Ecosystem Management Program

**Meeting date:** October 22, 2025

**Prepared on:** October 14, 2025

**Attachments:** A) None

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**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. 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.

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. 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—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 concludes at the end of this month.

### **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; Sierra Nevada Conservancy; University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources; Inyo National Forest; biomass project proponents West Biofuels, 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; discussion of needs and potential ESCOG roles in regionalizing biomass utilization development.

### **Recommendations**

ESCOG's engagement in biomass utilization development could support 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 across the state include:

### **Step 1: Convene 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).
- Biomass convenings could be part of the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance’s planned activities, led by ESCOG.

### **Step 2: Regionalize Biomass Utilization**

- 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 while continuing to support ESCCRP.
- ESCOG should address biomass utilization needs that arise from implementation of the new Community Wildfire Defense Grant.
- ESCOG could lead efforts to strengthen a regional bio- or stewardship economy, rooted in the region’s history and addressing ongoing needs for landscape restoration.
- ESCOG could invite partnership and engagement with the Bishop Paiute Tribe.

### **Step 3: Support Biomass Business Development**

- 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.
- Workforce: Continue engagement with Sierra Jobs First partner Central Sierra Economic Development District to support biomass/bioeconomy workforce development and training programs.

All of these recommendations and ideas are contingent upon funding to support additional staff or consultants. Other regions in the LCI “biomass pilot” group have estimated \$200,000–\$300,000 in annual costs to support similar activities.

### **Future Funding Opportunities**

The state funding outlook has changed since June, and 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 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.
- 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.
- SNC's grant programs are oversubscribed and competitive. ESCOG's continued participation and leadership in ESWA, along with board confirmation of willingness to take on a role in biomass utilization development, could strengthen the region's position for funding.

### **Requested Action**

Confirm ESCOG's interest in supporting regional biomass utilization development as part of ESCOG's Sustainable Recreation and Ecosystem Management Program and provide staff direction to continue participation in regional efforts through Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance to pursue future wildfire resilience grant funding opportunities.