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Eastern Sierra Council of Governments Joint Powers Authority Agenda

April 22, 2026

Michael Maguire
Senior Planner, Wildfire Resilience and Disaster Recovery
California Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation
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Re: State Funding Request to Support Biomass Planning in the Eastern Sierra

Dear Mr. Maguire,

On behalf of the Eastern Sierra Council of Governments (ESCOG) Joint Powers Authority, thank you for your ongoing leadership in supporting California's wildfire-vulnerable regions. The Eastern Sierra faces escalating wildfire risk, rising vegetation management costs, and limited options for handling woody biomass generated by essential fuel reduction and forest health work. Today, we respectfully request \$1.5 million in state funding, allocated over three years, to take the next essential steps in developing practical, community-supported solutions for biomass handling and utilization throughout the Eastern Sierra region.

Our request builds on significant progress already made by ESCOG and our regional partners. With state support, we have completed an assessment of biomass needs and set of recommendations that identify feasible pathways to improve the way woody material is aggregated, processed, and beneficially used across the Eastern Sierra. This work represents the most coordinated regional evaluation to date of opportunities for improving wildfire resilience through better biomass management. With the assessment now complete, our region is ready to move from analysis into implementation. The requested state investment will allow us to do exactly that.

The Eastern Sierra's Biomass Challenge

The Eastern Sierra landscape presents a unique combination of risks and constraints. Our steep topography, limited road networks, and small, rural populations result in high unit costs for fuel reduction and forest restoration. Our isolated geography makes transportation to existing biomass processing facilities outside the region cost prohibitive and our variation of feedstock types requires a nuanced solution for biomass aggregation. Federal, state, tribal, and local partners are working hard to increase the pace and scale of hazardous fuel reduction, yet all are strained by one persistent challenge: how to responsibly manage the material once it is removed.

As fuels reduction and forest restoration work continues to scale up across the region, so does the amount of leftover wood and green waste. Today, most of this material must be hauled long

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distances or burned in piles, which is costly, time-consuming, and offers no local benefit. Without better options, this bottleneck slows down critical wildfire resilience projects. The Eastern Sierra needs biomass solutions that are simple, realistic, and right-sized for our small communities and rural geography.

Background

LCI Pilot Project Outcomes

In 2025, ESCOG participated in the Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation biomass pilot to determine whether the Eastern Sierra needs a regional entity to coordinate biomass planning and feedstock management. Through four meetings held between June and October 2025, ESCOG brought together regional partners to develop a shared understanding of the biomass landscape, review project updates from GC Forest Products and West Biofuels, examine Whitebark Institute's updated feedstock assessment within the Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Resiliency Project (ESCCRP) 68,000-acres landscape-scale project area, and consider the Inyo National Forest's five-year program of work to better understand future material supply. At its October 22, 2025 meeting, the ESCOG Board voted unanimously to add regional biomass utilization to its Sustainable Recreation and Ecosystem Management program and directed staff to continue leading this work as a regional priority.

The pilot identified clear next steps for ESCOG: continue biomass convenings through the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance, build additional staff or consultant capacity, create a biomass information hub for reports and technical materials, and develop an Eastern Sierra Biomass Entity Action Plan to define the long-term roles of regional agency partners. It also highlighted the need to expand feedstock assessment beyond the ESCCRP area, improve data and mapping on wood residue sources, and provide business-facing support related to feedstock contracting, grant development, and project implementation.

The pilot clarified the practical gaps that still limit implementation. Feedstock is generated through multiple projects, jurisdictions, and ownerships, and the region does not yet have a coordinated approach for aggregating material or matching supply to potential end uses. Partners also need better information about the contracting and agreement tools that affect how material moves from treatment work to potential users. In addition, businesses and project developers need clearer information about feedstock reliability, transportation costs, site constraints, permitting requirements, and financing pathways. These are the barriers that now need to be addressed if the region is going to move from planning to implementation.

Local Context, Work Underway, and the Need to Adapt

The scale of work already underway in the Eastern Sierra makes this need clear. The ESCCRP is a 68,000-acre forest resilience effort centered largely on Inyo National Forest lands in Mono County. The project includes a completed NEPA decision covering 58,000 high-risk acres, with a secondary planning phase underway to add approximately 10,000 acres in the West Mono Basin. Regional feedstock analysis indicates that approximately 15,000 to 30,000 bone dry tons of forest residue could be generated annually as ecological thinning and fuels reduction work expands. That same analysis found that 93 percent of potentially available biomass in the study area is on Inyo National Forest land. The Inyo National Forest Land Management Plan

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also identifies at least 20,000 acres of vegetation restoration over 10 to 15 years, with a minimum annual treatment target of 2,000 acres. These figures show the scale of material the region must be prepared to manage if forest resilience work is going to continue expanding.

Whitebark Institute has also secured approximately \$7 million from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to support continued implementation of priority acres within the ESCCRP, reinforcing that forest treatment work in the region is increasing, not slowing down, and that the need for practical biomass solutions will only grow as more material is generated.

Community fuels work adds to that volume. ESCOG's \$4.6 million Community Wildfire Defense Grant is expected to remove at least 1,900 tons of hazardous community fuels annually across Inyo and Mono Counties.

West Biofuels has pursued development of a bioenergy facility near Mammoth Lakes, which built upon a Mono County site analysis, feedstock assessment of the ESCCRP, and power sales planning. That model is now paused, in large part because of the expiration of the BioMAT program and uncertainty in Federal Department of Energy funding.

The region is also exploring additional pathways, including biomass-to-hydrogen discussions with a novel hydrogen company, Ways2H, to identify pathways for alternative fuel production for the Eastern Sierra Transit Authority fleet, and carbon credit opportunities associated with biochar that is retained for long-term storage or beneficial local use. These pathways need to be evaluated alongside bioenergy, wood products, and other potential end uses.

How the Regional Network Is Working

The Eastern Sierra has a functioning regional structure for moving forest resilience work from planning into implementation, and ESCOG has played a central role in organizing that structure across jurisdictions. The key mechanism for that coordination is the Eastern Sierra Wildfire Alliance, the region's wildfire-focused collaborative, which brings partners together across wildfire-related topics to align planning, implementation, and regional priorities. ESCOG has made third-party capacity support and coordination with Federal land managers (USFS, BLM) a primary priority, as demonstrated by the Eastern Sierra Pace and Scale Accelerator, which incubated local capacity to advance wildfire resiliency projects. ESCOG has also strengthened coordination with the Inyo National Forest through the Inyo National Forest Liaison Cost Share Agreement, creating stronger communication and joint planning pathways with federal leadership.

The Eastern Sierra Pace and Scale Accelerator project was catalyzed building regional capacity. This project resulted in a Inyo National Forest NEPA decision covering 58,000 high-risk acres of the Eastern Sierra Climate and Communities Resilience Project, and a secondary planning phase is now underway to add approximately 10,000 acres in the West Mono Basin, bringing the total project boundary to about 68,000 acres. The Eastern Sierra Pace and Scale Accelerator strengthen organizational relationships and support systems needed for project development, environmental analysis, workforce development, and implementation.

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That broader network is active in carrying out different parts of the work. The Inyo National Forest is central because it drives much of the treatment work and future feedstock supply in the region. The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is central for longer-term regional planning in the northern portion of the study area. Caltrans partners with the Forest through Good Neighbor Authority to reduce hazardous fuels along road corridors. Whitebark Institute, National Forest Foundation, and California Deer Association use state and federal funding under stewardship agreements to support fuels reduction, forest restoration, environmental compliance, and implementation. Local businesses such as GC Forest Products and Eastside Mill and Lumber Company contribute by purchasing timber sales and supporting on-the-ground vegetation management. The Bishop Paiute Tribe is expanding workforce capacity through fuels reduction crews and related training, while Southern California Edison conducts vegetation management within utility corridors and coordinates with tribal and local partners on fuelwood distribution. Together, these efforts show that the region has an operational network for increasing forest and community resilience work.

In order for these wildfire resiliency efforts to be successful, the next priority is biomass-specific capacity within that existing regional structure. As forest treatment and community fuels work expand, the region needs broader analysis of which technologies fit Eastern Sierra conditions, where different types of biomass-related businesses could realistically be located, and how partners can align feedstock, infrastructure, and market conditions to support viable utilization pathways. Moving biomass off the landscape – ideally into productive use – is now the bottleneck for project implementation.

Next Steps and Proposed Actions

The ESCOG is requesting \$1.5 million to accomplish the following activities:

1. Build ESCOG staff capacity for regional biomass coordination

ESCOG needs dedicated staff capacity to coordinate regional biomass work. This includes technical expertise in biomass utilization and aggregation, convening partners, organizing information, coordinating with local, state, tribal, and federal partners, aligning work across counties and agencies, connecting forest-generated feedstock to regional planning, and maintaining continuity across multiple projects and market conversations.

Deliverable: Staff capacity to support an ESCOG-led regional biomass coordination function that serves as the central organizing point for biomass planning, partner coordination, and next-step implementation.

2. Conduct ongoing technical assessment of biomass pathways, markets, and contracting needs

The region needs ongoing technical assessment of biomass utilization pathways. This includes bioenergy, hydrogen, biochar, carbon credits, upstream credit markets, value-added wood products, and other emerging technologies. This work should evaluate cost, scale, transportation, infrastructure needs, feedstock characteristics, and fit for Eastern Sierra conditions. It should also assess feedstock aggregation strategies, supply reliability, and the contracting or agreement approaches that may help connect material generated through forest and community fuels work

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to viable end uses. In addition, this work should help identify key business development and financing considerations that affect project feasibility in the region.

Deliverable: An ongoing technical assessment function that evaluates utilization pathways, market opportunities, feedstock aggregation needs, and contracting mechanisms relevant to the region.

3. Conduct broader regional site analysis for biomass-related businesses and facilities

The region needs a comprehensive site analysis that considers site feasibility and suitable technologies across Inyo and Mono Counties, not just one county and not just one facility type. This analysis should identify possible locations for different types of biomass-related businesses and facilities based on feedstock access, transportation, infrastructure, ownership, land use compatibility, permitting requirements, and community fit. The study should help clarify which site types are most viable for different scales and uses of biomass-related activity.

Deliverable: A region-wide site analysis for a range of biomass-related business and facility types, including key site constraints and development considerations.

4. Create an Eastern Sierra Biomass Entity Action Plan

The region needs a practical action plan that defines how biomass coordination across entities, from land managers to workforce development partners. It should identify supply chain requirements, agency functions and roles, regional priorities, implementation needs, next-step opportunities, and future investment needs so that the region can move from fragmented project work to a more organized biomass system.

Deliverable: An Eastern Sierra Biomass Entity Action Plan that guides implementation, coordination, and future investment.

Conclusion

In closing, the Eastern Sierra is prepared to accelerate wildfire resiliency and biomass opportunities forward collaboratively and sustainably. With the support of the Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation's support, ESCOG can help organize partners, adapt to changing technology and market conditions, and position the region to make more effective long-term use of biomass generated through wildfire resilience and forest health efforts.

Sincerely,



Elaine Kabala
Executive Director
Eastern Sierra Council of Governments