

Dead Sierra trees mean a new, extended life for a Fresno biomass plant

By Marc Benjamin

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Dead trees will continue being turned into electricity near Fresno for another five years after a biomass plant in Malaga got a contract to supply Southern California Edison.

The contract ends concerns that the facility, which employs 25 workers and has a \$3.5 million annual payroll, could close soon. The plant's contract was extended twice this year because of dead trees cut down in the Sierra.

The 24-megawatt plant was supposed to close Dec. 31 without a new contract. Utilities no longer were going to pay for electricity generation from biomass plants because the fixed price that supported the plants was expiring.

Biomass plants in Delano, Mendota, Dinuba, Terra Bella and Firebaugh have closed in recent years because of expired power purchasing agreements.

The state Public Utilities Commission required SCE, Pacific Gas & Electric and San Diego Gas & Electric to acquire 50 megawatts of power through biomass facilities after the governor signed an emergency proclamation in 2015.

Biomass plants burn plant matter – like dead trees and waste from farm fields – to create electricity that then is fed into the state's power grid.

Drought and the bark beetle infestation has left more than 100 million dead trees in the Sierra, many of which are tall pine trees, the U.S. Forest Service reported two weeks ago. That number is up from about 60 million reported earlier this year. The most seriously damaged forests are in a 10-county Sierra region stretching between Kern and El Dorado counties. The hardest hit counties are Tulare, Fresno, Madera, Mariposa and Tuolumne.

A power plant in Rocklin, east of Sacramento, which also generates 24 megawatts, will remain open along with a Tuolumne County plant that generates 18 megawatts near Jamestown. IHI Power Services, Corp., which is the Malaga plant's parent company, also owns the Rocklin plant and is a partner in the Tuolumne County plant.

The governor's emergency proclamation directed the state Public Utilities Commission to ensure that existing biomass plants could reduce the number of dead trees in the Sierra, said Rick Spurlock, general manager of the Rio Bravo Fresno plant in Malaga.

In addition, earlier this year, state legislation required the three investor-owned utilities to acquire an additional 125 megawatts from biomass under Senate Bill 859.

The legislation's main sponsor, Sen. Brian Dahle, R-Bieber, said the goal was to keep the biomass firms operating because they offer a lesser-polluting option than open burning, feed electricity to the grid and keep people employed.

"Our goal was just to try to save what we had because once you lose them, it's really hard to get them back," Dahle said.

After the legislation was approved, the power plants entered a competitive bidding process to sell electricity to the utilities.

Because Rio Bravo Fresno won its bid it will continue to supply 24 megawatts of electricity to the grid, an equivalent of 24,000 homes. In addition to employee payroll, the company spends \$2 million for plant maintenance and another \$5.5 million in fuel purchases, such as wood and agricultural waste. The supply chain has about 100 employees, plant officials say.

The Rio Bravo plant, built in 1988, underwent a \$10 million renovation eight years ago. Each hour, it turns 35 tons of wood from agricultural waste and the forest into power sufficient for a city nearly the size of Clovis.

Spurlock said the revenue generated from selling electricity pays for the fuel, such as wood from dead trees or local agricultural prunings that would otherwise be burned.

“Just under 50 percent (of the wood) is from tree mortality areas,” he said.

But the biomass industry is not without its critics.

Tom Frantz, president of the Association of Irrigated Residents, which opposes biomass facilities, said dead trees can get chipped in the forest and put back on the ground as cover.

He said chipping trees and driving them down via diesel truck to be burned creates more pollution than keeping the chips in the forest.

“Hauling dead trees to the Valley to incinerate them is an insult to the people of the San Joaquin Valley,” said Frantz, who lives in Shafter.

But Spurlock said Rio Bravo is getting more material from the forest’s high hazard areas and less from the Valley. He assumes that points to additional agricultural burning.

San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District documents dating back to 2010 show no record of air quality violations by Rio Bravo in Fresno.

Spurlock said most of the plant’s most serious pollutants are eliminated from the air by the facility’s best available control technology.

“We do have a smokestack, but our emissions are about a 98 percent reduction from the material that would be traditionally disposed of through open burning,” he said.