

Biomass plants make pitch for dead trees

By Marc Benjamin, Fresno Bee

Trees are dying in the Sierra at modern-day unprecedented rates, posing elevated fire danger and creating health, water and air quality concerns, but a possible solution to rid the forest of dead and dying trees is getting short shrift, officials say.

California's biomass industry is set up regionally to turn agricultural waste into electricity while eliminating open burning. But many local biomass plants have closed or are closing soon because it costs less to produce electricity with solar and wind, which get subsidies that are not available to biomass.

There are plans to build smaller biomass plants in the Sierra to address tree mortality, but critics say they won't accommodate dead tree disposal needs.

Environmentalists say biomass plants pollute the air.

Electricity generated by biomass is costlier than other options such as solar and wind, a concern to state and public utilities commission officials who are responsible to ratepayers, said Julee Malinowski Ball, executive director of the California Biomass Energy Alliance.

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