

Committee on Resources

resources.committee@mail.house.gov

[Home](#) [Press Gallery](#) [Subcommittees](#) [Issues](#) [Legislation](#) [Hearing Archives](#)

**Statement of the
National Association of Conservation Districts
Jason Drew, District Manager, Nevada Tahoe Conservation District
Relative to
Developing Biomass Potential: Turning Hazardous Fuels into Valuable Products**

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
June 23, 2004

The National Association of Conservation Districts is the nonprofit, nongovernment organization representing the nation's 3,000 conservation districts, their 16,000 board members and 7,000 employees. Established under state law, conservation districts are local units of state government charged with carrying out programs for the protection and management of natural resources at the local level. Conservation districts work with a number of federal, state and other local agencies, as well as the private sector to provide technical and other assistance to millions of landowners and other partners to achieve this end. They provide the critical linkage for delivering conservation programs on nearly 70 percent of the private land in the contiguous United States.

In carrying their mission, districts work closely with the USDA's Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management to provide the technical and other help private landowners need to plan and apply complex conservation treatments on forest, range and other working lands.

On behalf of America's conservation districts, I am pleased to provide you with our insight on the role conservation districts play, and can play, throughout the country in hazardous fuels reduction, woody biomass utilization and forest planning.

Hazardous fuels build up is a serious threat nationwide. It threatens the viability of national forests, private forestlands—industrial and non-industrial and property in the wildland-urban interface. Excess woody biomass is exacerbated by the long-term drought plaguing much of the country and insect infestations, which in turn raises the danger of devastating wildfires that destroy wildlife habitat, communities and human life.

Conservation districts strongly support efforts to reduce hazardous fuels build up, develop new and innovative technologies to use woody biomass and to educate the public about proper forest management.

The decline of the forest industry in the West contributes to the problem by removing many business options for utilizing woody biomass. Distances from markets and the high costs of transportation make utilizing woody biomass even more difficult.

Conservation districts applaud the Congress for its quick action on the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. Its funding and implementation through the National Fire Plan provide opportunities for local communities and organizations, including conservation districts, to become engaged in fuels reduction projects and education. Commitment from Congress and the administration to this end is crucial to the success of this effort.

Conservation districts and resource conservation and development councils (RC&Ds) already have in place a number of cooperative agreements with federal land management agencies to promote, and improve the utilization of woody biomass in order to reduce catastrophic wildland fires and restore forest, woodland, and rangeland health.

In my conservation district, the Nevada Tahoe Conservation District in Stateline, Nevada, forest conditions in areas surrounding Lake Tahoe are indicative of many areas in the Western US experiencing an

accumulation of excess fuels leading to reduced resistance to wildfire, disease and insect infestations. These large quantities of biomass are not merchantable as wood products or through other manufacturing industries. However, utilization of this biomass for energy offers a potential economic use for this material, which would help reduce fuel loads.

We recently completed a woody biomass resource and technology assessment for the Lake Tahoe Basin. The study quantifies the Basin's biomass resources and costs, analyzes biomass energy technology performance characteristics, assesses local opportunities for using the material, and summarizes the results of initial planning on a pilot project conducted in conjunction with the Lake Tahoe Unified School District. The study showed there are opportunities for small-scale biomass energy systems to be deployed in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

As a result of the Biomass Feasibility Assessment, sponsored by my District, the Lake Tahoe Unified School District is pursuing funding to purchase a co-generation boiler system to be deployed in the local high school. Biomass to run the new system will be supplied by Basin land management agencies from fuels management projects. I have attached a copy of the executive summary of the assessment to my written statement.

In your congressional district, Mr. Chairman, the Deschutes Soil and Water Conservation District received an \$89,000 National Fire Plan Community Assistance grant in 2001 to implement an innovative project that turns woody biomass into compost. The grant enabled the district to implement the composting project for Sun River Utilities, which serves Sun River Lodge and Resort and about 4,000 homes in the Sun River development, near Deschutes National Forest. The landowner group was concerned about wildfire and undertook fuels reduction efforts in the lodge pole and ponderosa pine forests. That produced woody biomass from ladder fuels. The organic compost is then sold or spread on Sun River golf courses, building soil composition in an area with volcanic soils that lack organic matter, making it a valued soil additive.

The district continues to focus on initiatives that turn woody biomass "liabilities" into "assets." The district says it needs incentives and marketing capacity to demonstrate value in that material, process it and move it out.

Conservation districts believe efforts such as those I just described and other innovative projects offer tremendous opportunities to reduce catastrophic wildland fires and restore forest, woodland, and rangeland health. In fact, NACD recently entered into a cooperative agreement with the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service to develop, promote, and improve woody biomass utilization.

Other partners in this effort include the Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, the cooperative National Fire Plan and the National Association of Resource Conservation & Development Councils.

Under this agreement, NACD is providing resource materials and information to local conservation districts to educate landowners and others on the issue. The goal of this initiative is to help increase public understanding of the social, economic, environmental and aesthetic benefits gained by using woody biomass as a means of reducing fuel buildup on public lands.

We believe more cooperative efforts such as this are needed. Involving local communities and landowners is the ideal way to ensure the success of the Healthy Forests Initiative, the National Fire Plan and other efforts in wildland fire management.

Conservation districts also support other collaborative efforts of the Interior and Agriculture Departments in conducting fuel reduction treatments in the urban wildland interface on federal lands that are at risk from wildfire. To maximize their effectiveness, we believe these collaborative fuels hazard reduction efforts should include:

- A landscape scale approach with the support and involvement of local constituents;
- Cross boundary mitigation;
- Coordination of Federal, state and local government priorities, project design and implementation strategies to maximize effectiveness and minimize costs; and
- Project designs that consider restoration of ecosystem structure, native composition and natural fire regimes.

The drought, which is expected to continue unabated for several more years—especially in the West—adds

to the wildland fire issue by contributing to insect and disease problems national forests, BLM lands and private woodlands, as well. Not only is the damage costly to timber, but it also adds to the fuel load.

The nation's conservation districts believe that there are yet many opportunities to develop biomass potential and turn hazardous fuels into useful and valuable products and look forward to continuing our partnerships with the various federal agencies that are responsible for managing the nation's public forests and rangelands.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide the subcommittee with our views.