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## Microgrid tech pursued in Auberry

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The old mill site in Auberry has some glowing new tenants. Well, not new, they've actually been at it for two or three years.

Sierra Resource Conservation District (SRCD) has set up initial operations for a biomass campus. The new facility will generate electricity that utilizes byproducts from our local forests and surrounding private land, and will become the heart of production for local forest products and forest restoration projects.

The plant doesn't burn forest byproducts, but rather, uses a gasification process that pushes out the natural gas which is reused in an internal combustion engine, which then produces energy. Biomass plants are favorable for forest restoration and recovery by making it more affordable. It also advances support to manage more forest acres.

"We're in the initial stages of producing energy from all of the dead wood in the Sierra. Currently, we're using wood chips to scale, but we have plans to grow as needs increase," says district manager Steve Haze. "Together

with microgrid technology, this could eventually produce a purchased powered option to the community, instead of relying on energy companies like PG&E."

The campus is currently looking at a way to implement microgrid technology to help towns like Auberry become more resilient to wildfires and to create more independence from companies like PG&E and Edison. A microgrid is a compressed version of the larger electrical grid that powers smaller communities. Essentially, it works in the exact same way, but is designed for a smaller geographic area.

The benefit of microgrids is that they can become an "electrical island" in the event of a power outage. The microgrid's purpose is to supply energy to customers when the larger electrical grid goes out. This creates resilience and energy independence in the event of a wildfire, planned power outage, or extreme weather events. A microgrid can operate both on and off of the grid.

The group also hopes to become an economic catalyst for new businesses in Auberry. As they focus on forest restoration and recovery, they will create jobs

related to it. The group has hired graduate students from Fresno State, students from Reedley College, and the National Forestry Service. They are funded by the State of California and the Department of Conservation and are currently working with commercial and private landowners to implement a workforce development program.

Fresno County District 5 Supervisor Nathan Magsig supports the operations.

"The dead trees in the Sierra can either become a fuel load for energy, or it can become a fuel load for wildfires on the bottom of the forest floor," explains Magsig. "When you look at the community of Auberry, 40 years ago it had a thriving timber and logging industry that employed hundreds of families. The mill had both a biomass component and a finished timber component. I'd love for the timber industry to be revived, but in the short term, biomass campuses and microgrids could be ripe opportunities for communities like Auberry."

SRCD has support from the Sierra National Forest and the Governor's Office of Planning and Research and no opposition.