

Historic North Fork Mill site gets new life

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The 67-year old Historic North Fork Mill site won't remain silent any longer as Coarsegold resident Erick Robertson has opened Alpine Sierra Greencycling, a wood-biomass processing and recycling operation that never burns its resources.

Greencycling will produce co-generation fuel chips, decorative landscape materials, composts and mulches, wood stove pellets, sawdust, firewood, milled lumber and furniture production.

The North Fork Mill closed its doors in 1994 but Robertson plans to fill a portion of the property with wood chippers, grinders, mobile mills, shredders and compost piles and boost North Fork's economy by hiring locals to run the business. He hopes to have 25 employees by mid summer and by the end of the year level out at a total of 50 jobs created.

Robertson, who has a background in soils engineering and surveying and leases his own small mill site in North Fork, has been working with local, county and state agencies to ensure the success of his business.

The idea struck him when he kept seeing timber in the forest, left behind due to the decline in prices at commercial lumber mills. He also noticed that forests were overgrown which is a serious fire hazard.

"There wasn't a good exit strategy when the mills closed and now forests are 400% overgrown," Robertson said. He said the business will be able to work off site and on site to clear biomass out of the forest.

"In the mountain communities, we're right up against the Sierra National Forest and we know that our forests are dangerously overgrown," said Dan Rosenberg, NFCDC president. "It's a catastrophic fire risk and we need to manage this resource in a way that is safe -- and one of those ways is to process the brush that comes out of the forest."

Retired U.S. Forest Service District Ranger Larry Ballew has a lifetime background in forest management and stresses the importance of the project. He said the benefits of what Robertson is doing are fire protection, water production, wildlife habitat and usable, beneficial resources.

"Our forests are in the worse health they've ever been in with no management primarily because of politics, legal issues and lawsuits," Ballew said. "Right now the forest is scheduled to die, rot and burn. Eric is using something that is a detriment and improving food production for animals, fish and man through this operation."

Ballew said forests are overgrown and not only does that raise the risk of out-of-control fire, but also cuts down on our water resources. Ballew said the overgrown biomass is taking in valuable amounts of water. "By eliminating evapotranspiration (water loss from the soil), we're increasing water by 30%," Ballew said. "This business will be a benefit to everyone."

Not only will Greencycling help forest management, it will also be an asset to the private individual.

"The public can bring in clippings and leaves, lumber, and stumps instead of burning because it's going to be highly regulated through laws designed to reduce carbon output," Robertson said. "The current conditions and laws make this business more viable than it has been in the post-commercial history of the North Fork Mill Site."

"For 15 years the North Fork Community Development Council has been working on developing and cleaning up the environmental issues at the Mill Site and this has allowed us to pick the site for business," Robertson said.

"A lot of people are already seeing business potential here. We're looking forward to being involved with developers coming in and it will draw in a whole circle of businesses and revive some existing businesses that have been struggling."

Community Development Council President Dan Rosenberg said Greencycling is just what the community wants and needs.

"I'm really, really excited about this," he said. "The community in North Fork has wanted businesses to generate jobs at the mill site. Over the years we've done a lot of community meetings and developed a master plan but it was difficult to attract business. A wood based business was at the top of the community's wish list. We're hoping it's a renaissance of businesses."

Robertson said there are a lot of people in the community and the county that believe in this project. District 5 Supervisor Tom Wheeler represents both areas.

"It's great to finally see this," Wheeler said. "We have one already, Crossroads Recycled Lumber, and now we've got this one. I've been trying to help Erick get this for over a year. With all the cleanup (of the mill) and restrictions, we couldn't get much done, but now we can do something."

"If we get this business started, it will make other people think it's possible to start a new business at the site."