

Sonoma County Biomass Business Competition

Local Innovation for Sustainable Forests & Growing Small Business



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. What is the Sonoma Biomass Business Competition?

The Northern Sonoma County Air Pollution District (NoSoCoAir) – in collaboration with Sonoma County Economic Development Board, The Napa-Sonoma Small Business Development Center, CAL FIRE, and Sonoma Clean Energy – is launching the Sonoma Biomass Business Competition (a.k.a. “Bio Biz Competition”) to turn wildfire risk in Sonoma County into an economic development opportunity. Through a county-wide collaboration of forest experts, business leaders and public officials, the Competition is looking to build a wood products industry in Sonoma from forest restoration projects by directly investing in local small business entrepreneurs who can catalyze an untapped sector in California.

2. What is the goal

The goal of the Competition is to create economic incentives and markets which support ongoing and sustainable fire-safe vegetation management and avoid air pollution from catastrophic wildfires. The selected awardee(s) will actively work with state, regional, and local entities to accomplish and expand vegetation removal projects that supply a high-value end-use for commercial and non-merchantable wood. The Competition supports launching a new small business venture or expansion of an existing small business to build and expand the local wood utilization market.

3. Why is this happening

Sonoma County is actively under threat of wildfire and is experiencing frequent power shutoffs due to the threat of wildfire in the area. With wildfires becoming more frequent and more severe, NoSoCoAir established its “Healthy Forests, Clean Air Initiative” in 2018 to connect with regional partners and to support innovative solutions to forest fuels management that promote clean air quality. In 2019, the North Sonoma Air Pollution Control District Board of Directors established an ad-hoc Biomass Committee with initial members comprised of Chair Lynda Hopkins (Sonoma County Supervisor, District 5), Director Melanie Bagby (Cloverdale Mayor), District counsel, and the Air Pollution Control Officer.

Recognizing the numerous and diverse amount of benefits associated with managing wood waste streams for higher value content and the need for a self-sustaining economic model, the Committee chose to support innovative, local entrepreneurs. The Competition is a collaboration of over 20 diverse and experienced organizations coming together to catalyze a new industry. The Competition will reflect the immense amount of State policy support like SB 859’s Wood Utilization Barriers team working under the State’s Forest Management Task Force to encourage business development through proven non-merchantable woody-product solutions.

4. Who is eligible

The Competition is open to new and existing small business entrepreneurs who believe they can develop a successful wood product utilization model. Sponsored by local support, the Competition aims to promote local employment and local business opportunities on all contracts. Competition proposals will be reviewed and scored by an interdisciplinary panel on a series of criteria. Businesses not located in the County may participate, but the feedstock that will supply the business model must be sourced from within Sonoma County.

5. What is the timeline

The Bio Biz Competition will be launched with a request for proposals (RFP) beginning in late Winter 2020 or early Spring of 2021. An informational session will be provided to help applicants. From that point, there will be a 2-3-month submission period followed by a two-step review period. In the first step the inter-disciplinary panel will review the proposals for eligibility; perform preliminary scoring; and move the most promising candidates forward. In the second step the candidates will pitch their ideas in person; the proposal scores will be finalized; and then the winners will be announced. Winning proposals should have funds available to them by Fall 2021.

6. How much will I win

The Competition will have several different categories for businesses to submit proposals. The award amounts and categories will be finalized by XX. We are actively collecting donations and sponsorships and currently have commitments of approximately \$50,000; and we are actively working for more! Additionally, our project team will be reaching out to prominent companies to solidify an Awards Package containing technical services like site and permitting assessment, marketing, and other business development services to help launch your idea.

7. How do I apply

Watch for the RFP, mentioned above, which will offer a web site landing page filled with relevant information and a link to submit your application. To receive updates on this and other relevant news visit the Bio Biz web page (www.NoSoCoAir.net/biobiz.html) and consider signing sign up for e-mail updates. Do not wait for the RFP to begin to start thinking about your proposal. We encourage you to begin planning, building, and networking with your community on what possibilities exist within this space in anticipation of the RFP release.

8. What are some of the issues to developing a forest-based business in Sonoma County?

Sonoma County experiences severe “overcrowding” of forest stands. As forest stands grow denser through no active management of the lands, the health of the forest is reduced as trees fight for the same water reserves, thus posing an immense wildfire risk and susceptibility to disease, pest, and invasive species. A unique challenge in Sonoma County is that the majority of forested land in the County is owned by small, private landowners as opposed to large, public landowners like the Forest Service. Known to the forest community as “parcelization”, a competitive applicant will understand this dynamic and work with the forest community to develop an innovative and effective business model.