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Forest Thinnings Could Be Source of Heat

By JEFF TOLLEFSON | The New Mexican

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Imagine burning slash wood and vegetation from the Santa Fe Municipal Watershed in a boiler that provides hot-water heat to businesses in downtown Santa Fe.

The danger of catastrophic fires would be reduced. Wood that would otherwise go to waste would provide free fuel for a clean, efficient boiler. Businesses -- and eventually local residents -- would trade in increasingly expensive and unpredictable natural-gas bills for a consistently cheap source of heat. Energy savings would translate into disposable income, boosting business investments and consumer spending alike.

Sounds good. But will it work?

One promoter says similar systems are working in hundreds of cities throughout Europe, and the U.S. departments of Energy and Agriculture have decided to spend \$1.28 million pursuing the idea.

The proposal by Local Energy, a Santa Fe nonprofit organization, was among 19 grant applications -- out of 400 nationally -- to be funded under a new biomass research and development program managed by the two departments, U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., announced Thursday.

"We anticipate that this will produce a significant decrease in the cost of heating energy to Santa Fe businesses," said Mark Sardella, co-founder of Local Energy, which formed earlier this year to advocate sustainable, locally driven energy projects.

"That's the big secret: Renewable energy is cheaper in this case," Sardella said. "We don't have to

sell renewable energy on its environmental benefits anymore."

Moreover, he said additional benefits would be derived from taking a community off natural gas, putting it on a cheap, local fuel source, harvested by local businesses and distributed through a locally owned system.

Local Energy will use the grant to conduct an economic-development study and complete a technical design of the project, officially dubbed a "biomass district energy system." A district energy system is essentially a boiler with a network of underground pipes that deliver hot water. Biomass, in this case forest thinnings, is the fuel.

Sardella said thousands of district energy systems are in place in the United States. Most run on natural gas, he said, although a few more creative systems burn things like municipal waste.

After looking into the technology, Sardella said, Local Energy settled on a European company that produces highly efficient, clean-burning biomass boilers, designed to run on various fuels.

According to initial calculations, thinnings from 7,000 acres of the watershed -- that portion of the watershed currently scheduled for thinning -- would provide 25 years of energy for the city, he said. He noted that annual growth on the watershed alone might be enough to fuel the system into the future.

The Forest Service is already planning to burn the thinnings in slash piles, he said. "Our idea is if we are already going to burn that material, let's burn it in a high-efficiency boiler and then turn off all the boilers downtown."

He said the initial phase of the project would provide heat to major downtown businesses. Hotels like Eldorado and La Fonda heat their buildings with hot water, he noted, so all they would have to do is tap into a new hot-water main. From there, the district energy system could expand to smaller businesses and residential users.

Sardella is among those projecting that natural-gas prices could continue to rise and remain high for years because of a supply shortage. That could have a huge impact on this community and New Mexico, he said, noting that higher energy costs drive up prices while simultaneously driving down spending.

"This program is designed to neutralize that threat," he said.

Domenici also cited the nation's energy woes in his praise for the proposal.

"Given the rising costs of fossil fuels, unique energy solutions will be needed to augment our energy options," he said in a prepared statement. "This project could lead to the development of a clean alternative energy source that will aid our environment as well as the economy."