



A BIOECONOMY PLAYBOOK FOR THE CITY OF SONORA

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Prepared By: Clere Inc.
Prepared For: Mariposa Resource Conservation District

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Introduction

This Bioeconomy Playbook examines the current business landscape in Sonora and identifies strategic opportunities that advance wildfire mitigation and forest health objectives, which can strengthen and expand forest-based economic activities. The bioeconomy, encompassing biomass utilization, value-added forest products, and commercial timber activities, represents a critical economic engine for rural communities in the Sierra Nevada region. This plan was developed through a collaborative partnership between the Central Sierra Economic Development District (CSEDD), with financial support from the Mariposa RCD and the associated program funded by the Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI). By describing existing resources, stakeholder networks, regulatory frameworks, and infrastructure, this document provides a foundation for identifying barriers to bioeconomy development and proposes targeted improvements that can enhance economic opportunities, support sustainable forest management, and build community resilience in Sonora.

The intended audiences for this document are businesses, public agencies, and nonprofits from out of the area who want to get a succinct overview of the opportunities for the bioeconomy in Sonora. Beyond just a “who’s who” - this document also gives technical advice related to land use development, specifics about current competitive businesses developing in the area, and cites other resources about biomass availability, economic development resources, and other information helpful to understanding the future for Sonora in this sector. To begin, the Playbook starts with an explanation of the different collaborative and advocacy groups and public organizations that are engaged in fuel reduction activities and describes their role in these projects. There are also some examples of recent successful public outreach on the topic of the bioeconomy. The last section of the first part goes over existing businesses in the space, as well as those in development. The Second Part of the Playbook describes the critical process that new construction for any bioeconomy-based business would need to undergo. First, there is a brief description of the California Environmental Quality Act, and a general discussion about how this law works, and subsequent descriptions of more bioeconomy-specific issues. Also, the county regulatory environment is discussed, including the County General Plan and Zoning. This information forms the basis for any successful business development that would involve the construction of a new building or other facility. In summary, this Bioeconomy Playbook for Sonora can serve as an important first look at the region when considering the placement of a new wood products or bioenergy themed business in the area.

Local Collaborative and Advocacy Groups in the City of Sonora

Sonora Chamber of Commerce

The Historic Sonora Chamber of Commerce is a registered 501(c)(6) membership organization that represents the business community in and around the City of Sonora. Its mission is to promote and support community, business, and tourism through marketing, promotion, and events, with the goal of making the greater Sonora area an excellent place to live, work, and play. The Chamber serves as a unified voice for Sonora's diverse business community and is recognized for balancing business advocacy with preservation of the city's history, culture, and small-town quality of life.

The Chamber organizes and supports a variety of activities and events, such as mixers, a music series in Coffill Park, and the annual Christmas Parade, which draw visitors downtown and strengthen local commerce. As part of its role in the community, the Chamber holds a contract with the City of Sonora to manage the Opera Hall and coordinate four community events throughout the year, of which the Christmas Parade is one. Membership is open to local businesses and organizations, providing them with networking opportunities, marketing exposure, and a direct channel into Sonora's business and tourism promotion efforts.

Central Sierra Economic Development District (CSEDD) and Mother Lode Job Training (MLJT)

CSEDD is a federally recognized Economic Development District and Joint Powers Authority serving Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Mariposa, and Tuolumne counties, with the City of Sonora as one of only two incorporated cities in its service area. Through the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDs), CSEDD works with local jurisdictions, including Sonora, to advance economic vitality, infrastructure, resilience, and sector development such as forestry and bioeconomy-related activities.

MLJT administers CSEDD and operates as the regional workforce development agency with a network of Career Centers in the Mother Lode, including a center serving Sonora and Tuolumne County. MLJT provides employers with recruitment assistance, on-the-job training subsidies, work experience placements, and skills assessments, while offering job seekers career planning, workshops, and training support. For bioeconomy, forestry, and manufacturing employers in and around Sonora, MLJT is a key partner for building a skilled workforce aligned with local industry needs.

Tuolumne Fire Safe Council

The Tuolumne Fire Safe Council is a grassroots nonprofit organization that covers north and south Tuolumne County and focuses on reducing wildfire hazards and the devastating effects of wildfires in communities that include the Sonora area. Its mission is to save lives and protect property through wildfire preparedness, prevention, education, and the construction of strategic fuel breaks. Since its incorporation, the Council has developed a network of fuel

treatments and shaded fuel breaks across north Tuolumne County and, after a 2021 service-area expansion, now serves the entire county.

The Council's projects, such as shaded fuel breaks and slash disposal sites, generate woody material that can serve as potential feedstock for biomass and other bioeconomy enterprises operating in or near Sonora. The organization also provides a platform for collaboration among residents, local government, and agencies, making it a useful partner for businesses that need to understand local fuel-reduction patterns and community wildfire priorities.

Tuolumne County Resource Conservation District (TCRCD)

The TCRCD is a non-regulatory special district based in Sonora with a mission to identify and meet the natural resource conservation needs of all people in Tuolumne County and its future generations. TCRCD focuses on conservation of soil, water, forest, and related natural resources by coordinating technical, financial, and educational resources on behalf of local land managers and residents.

The district works with landowners, growers, ranchers, public agencies, nonprofits, and private companies to implement voluntary conservation and fuel-reduction projects across the county. Projects such as fuels reduction around communities and recreation areas are designed to improve forest health and wildfire resilience, and they produce woody biomass that can be relevant to bioeconomy ventures situated in or serving the Sonora area.

City of Sonora – Community Development Department

The City of Sonora's Community Development Department is responsible for the orderly and organized development of all property within city limits and plays a central role in expanding the local economy. The department manages planning, building, and related development review functions and is charged with implementing City Council and Planning Commission policies in a way that improves quality of life for residents, visitors, and local businesses. Through special events such as the Sonora Certified Farmers Market and coordinated marketing activities, the department actively encourages both the local community and tourists to visit and spend time in Sonora's historic downtown.

The city is currently preparing a 2026–2029 Economic Development Strategic Plan, guided by a community survey that seeks input on how Sonora should attract investment, support local businesses, strengthen its workforce, and enhance overall community well-being. In addition, the city maintains a business resource hub that provides guidance on zoning, permits, business licensing, and connections to regional and state programs, offering a first stop for prospective or expanding businesses considering a location in Sonora.

Regional Forest Economy and Restoration Activity Near the City of Sonora

The incorporated City of Sonora does not currently host large primary wood products manufacturing facilities such as sawmills, veneer plants, or major timber processing operations within its city limits. Land use within the city is primarily residential, commercial, civic, and service-oriented, with only limited areas designated for manufacturing uses. The City's zoning map identifies the Limited Manufacturing (ML) district as the primary zoning classification intended to accommodate light industrial and manufacturing activities.

Although large wood processing facilities are not located within the city itself, Sonora sits within an active forest products economy in the central Sierra Nevada. Tuolumne County and the surrounding region contain extensive forestlands, including areas of the Stanislaus National Forest and privately managed timberlands. These lands support timber harvesting, forest restoration, and fuels reduction activities that generate sawlogs, small-diameter timber, and woody biomass as by-products of forest management.

Primary wood processing infrastructure serving the Sonora area is located in nearby unincorporated portions of Tuolumne County. One of the most significant facilities in the region is the Sierra Pacific Industries sawmill located in the community of Standard, just outside the City of Sonora. Sierra Pacific Industries operates multiple sawmills across California and the western United States and is one of the largest lumber producers in the country. The Standard facility processes timber harvested from regional forests and produces dimensional lumber and related wood products used in construction and manufacturing. The site also includes a biomass cogeneration facility that generates electricity using wood residues produced during the milling process.

In addition to commercial timber harvesting, forest management and wildfire mitigation work occurring throughout the Sierra Nevada generates substantial quantities of woody material. Mechanical thinning, fuels reduction treatments, and forest restoration projects remove small-diameter trees, brush, and logging residues in order to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health. These materials may be chipped, piled, and burned, or transported to processing facilities depending on available markets and project logistics.

Large-scale restoration work is currently underway on nearby federal forestlands. One example is the Stanislaus Landscape Project, part of the U.S. Forest Service Wildfire Crisis Strategy. This effort focuses on reducing hazardous fuel loads and improving forest resilience across a planning area of more than 300,000 acres within the Stanislaus National Forest. The project includes mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, and other restoration treatments intended to

reduce wildfire risk and improve ecosystem conditions across large portions of the forest located east of Sonora.

Additional restoration efforts occur through multi-county partnerships and stewardship agreements. Tuolumne County maintains a Master Stewardship Agreement with the U.S. Forest Service that allows the County and its partners to plan and implement landscape-scale restoration projects on the Stanislaus National Forest. Through this agreement and related collaborative initiatives, fuels reduction treatments and restoration projects are implemented across thousands of acres in areas surrounding communities in Tuolumne County.

Because Sonora serves as the primary commercial and service center for Tuolumne County, many of the contractors, equipment suppliers, professional services firms, and workforce development programs supporting forest management activities operate from or through the city. Regional workforce training programs administered through Mother Lode Job Training also provide training opportunities for forestry and fuels reduction occupations that serve projects throughout the Central Sierra.

Within the city itself, the scale and character of available industrial land generally favors smaller-scale manufacturing and processing activities rather than large industrial timber facilities. Potential forest-based businesses that could operate within Sonora include specialty wood fabrication, firewood processing and distribution, wood recycling, biomass aggregation and sorting, or emerging products such as biochar production. These types of operations typically require smaller industrial spaces and can often operate within light manufacturing zoning districts compatible with nearby commercial or urban uses.

Taken together, while the City of Sonora does not currently serve as a location for large-scale timber processing, it remains closely connected to the regional forest economy. Its proximity to active forest management areas and existing regional processing infrastructure creates opportunities for smaller-scale forest-based businesses that complement restoration activities occurring throughout the surrounding Sierra Nevada landscape.

Solid Waste and Wood Waste Management in the City of Sonora

The City of Sonora does not operate its own landfill or biomass processing facility. Solid waste generated within the city is managed through the broader Tuolumne County solid waste system, which includes transfer and disposal infrastructure serving communities throughout the county. The City has contracted with Cal Waste as the exclusive provider of solid waste services in Sonora, and waste from the area is commonly handled through facilities such as the Cal Sierra Transfer Station, which accepts municipal solid waste from the surrounding region. As part of this contract, all residents who subscribe to trash and recycling services will receive a green waste bin at no extra charge. Vegetative debris generated from residential landscaping,

tree maintenance, and defensible space activities is typically managed through the county's green waste disposal system. Tuolumne County operates the Cal Sierra Earth Resource Facility, which accepts brush, tree limbs, grass clippings, and other green waste materials, as well as untreated wood waste and certain construction materials. These facilities provide a centralized location where residents can dispose of yard debris and small woody material removed from properties.

In addition to routine disposal services, Tuolumne County periodically conducts green waste disposal events and defensible-space support programs that allow residents to dispose of vegetation removed for wildfire risk reduction. These programs focus on managing residential vegetation and reducing hazardous fuel accumulations rather than producing commercial wood products.

Because the City of Sonora is primarily a residential and commercial center rather than a location for forest management operations, most large volumes of woody biomass associated with fuel-reduction or forest restoration activities originate in surrounding unincorporated areas of Tuolumne County. As a result, wood waste management within the city itself is generally limited to residential green waste and urban tree debris handled through the county's solid waste and vegetation management infrastructure.

Public Outreach in the City of Sonora: Examples from Recent Years

Example 1: Dragoon Gulch Fuels Reduction Project Public Meeting and Implementation (2024–2026)

The Dragoon Gulch Fuels Reduction Project is a wildfire risk-reduction effort located adjacent to and partially within the City of Sonora. The project is being implemented by the Tuolumne Fire Safe Council with funding from CAL FIRE's Wildfire Prevention Grants Program and is designed to treat approximately 90 acres of vegetation surrounding the Dragoon Gulch trail system through manual thinning and mastication.

Prior to implementation, the Tuolumne Fire Safe Council hosted a public meeting in Sonora to present project plans and answer questions from residents about vegetation treatment, smoke impacts, and trail access. The project area includes popular recreation areas and neighborhoods near the Dragoon Gulch trail system, making public outreach an important part of project planning.

Implementation of the project has included vegetation thinning, pile burning, and other fuel-reduction treatments designed to reduce wildfire hazards near residential areas. In February 2026, crews conducted pile-burning operations that produced visible smoke in the Sonora area as slash piles generated during earlier vegetation treatment work were burned. Public

announcements were issued advising residents and trail users to expect smoke and to use caution near project areas.

Example 2: Forest Entrepreneurship Bootcamp at the Mother Lode Job Training Center (November 2024)

In November 2024, a two-day Forest Entrepreneurship Bootcamp was held at the Mother Lode Job Training Center in Sonora. The event was organized by Sierra Business Council, Sierra Commons, and Mother Lode Job Training and was designed to support the development of forest-based businesses in the Sierra Nevada region.

The training program focused on helping participants launch or expand businesses related to forest thinning, defensible-space services, small-diameter timber utilization, wood products manufacturing, bioenergy, and wildfire mitigation work. Participants received instruction on business planning, financing, marketing, and navigating government contracts and permitting requirements associated with forestry-related industries.

The bootcamp was supported through workforce development funding connected to the federal Good Jobs Challenge initiative, which supports training programs focused on forestry and wildfire mitigation jobs in the Sierra Nevada region. Events such as this provide opportunities for entrepreneurs, contractors, and small businesses to develop skills and partnerships needed to participate in forest-health and fuel-reduction work occurring across the region.

Example 3: CSEDD LEAF Conference on Forestry and Land-Based Economic Development (November 2025)

In November 2025, the Central Sierra Economic Development District (CSEDD) hosted the first LEAF Conference (Landscapes, Environment, Agriculture, and Forestry) as a hybrid event serving stakeholders across the five-county Central Sierra region, including Tuolumne County and the City of Sonora.

The conference brought together landowners, forestry professionals, entrepreneurs, educators, and regional leaders to discuss sustainable land management and economic development opportunities related to forestry, agriculture, and environmental stewardship. Sessions addressed topics including workforce development, infrastructure needs, environmental stewardship, and funding opportunities associated with natural resource industries.

The conference was organized as part of CSEDD's implementation of its 2024–2029 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, which identifies manufacturing and construction as priority sectors for regional economic growth. Because Sonora serves as the county seat and primary commercial center of Tuolumne County, regional economic

development initiatives led by CSEDD frequently involve participation from Sonora businesses, institutions, and community stakeholders.

Land use and CEQA Law; its application to Fuel Reduction & Biomass Use Projects

What is CEQA?

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) stands as a foundational pillar of environmental governance in California, mandating rigorous assessment and mitigation of environmental impacts for both public and private projects requiring governmental approval. Enacted in 1970, CEQA has evolved into a complex regulatory framework that still acts to support decision-makers and the public by ensuring that both are fully informed about the environmental consequences of proposed actions, while promoting sustainable outcomes through mitigation measures and alternatives. By requiring transparency and public participation, CEQA fosters accountability in land use planning and project development, making it one of the most influential environmental laws in the United States.

CEQA's regulatory structure is codified in the California Public Resources Code (PRC) and further elaborated in the CEQA Guidelines, administrative rules maintained by the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) and the Natural Resources Agency. The law defines a "project" as any activity undertaken, funded, or approved by a public agency that may cause direct or indirect physical changes to the environment. This broad definition encompasses everything from infrastructure development and zoning changes to regulatory approvals for private construction. However, not all projects require full environmental review, as certain activities may qualify for exemptions, including statutory exemptions created by the Legislature and categorical exemptions for classes of projects determined to have no significant environmental effect enacted through regulation. When environmental review is required, agencies may prepare either a Negative Declaration (ND or MND) for projects with potentially significant impacts that can be reduced to less than significant levels through mitigation measures, or a comprehensive Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for projects with unavoidable significant environmental effects that require detailed analysis of impacts, alternatives, and mitigation measures.

Central to CEQA's framework is the concept of the "lead agency," the public entity with primary authority to approve or carry out a project. The lead agency is responsible for determining the appropriate level of environmental review, preparing necessary documentation, and ensuring compliance with CEQA's procedural requirements. Other entities, termed "responsible

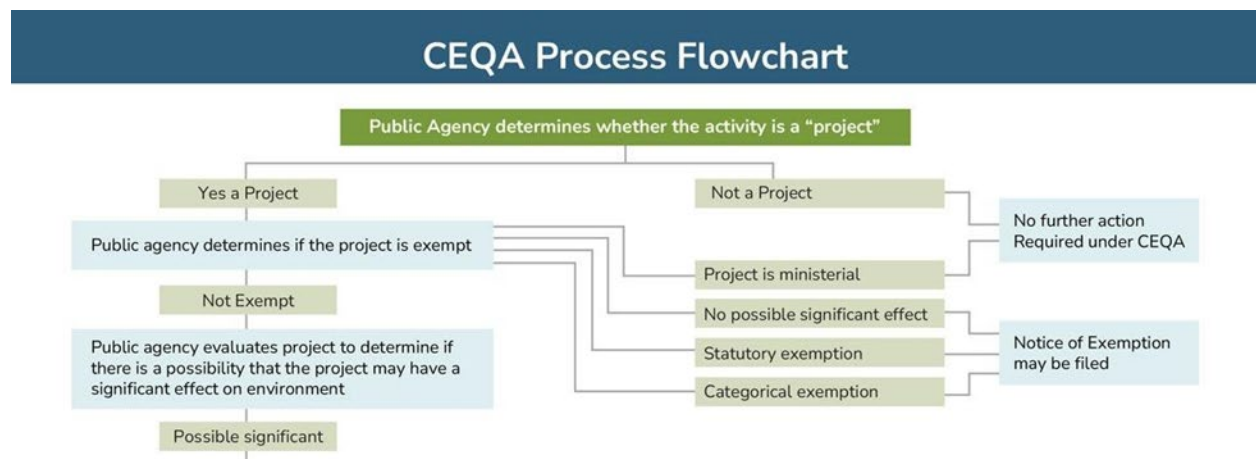
agencies” and “trustee agencies,” may also participate by providing expertise on specific resources such as water quality or endangered species.

The CEQA Process: Initial Determinations, Exemptions, and Analysis

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) establishes a structured environmental review process designed to systematically evaluate potential impacts, engage stakeholders, and ensure informed decision-making. This process unfolds through distinct phases, each with specific requirements and opportunities for public participation, while incorporating various exemptions to streamline review for projects with minimal environmental effects.

Threshold Determination and Exemption Analysis

The initial phase of CEQA compliance involves determining whether a proposed activity that requires a permit from a public agency qualifies as a “project” under the law. A “project” is broadly defined as any activity undertaken, funded, or approved by a public agency that may cause direct or indirect physical changes to the environment. This includes both public infrastructure initiatives and private developments requiring discretionary government approvals. If the activity is not a “project” then the CEQA is not triggered and no further analysis or action need be taken.



If an activity that needs a permit is considered a project under CEQA, the next question to ask is whether the project qualifies for one of the multiple pathways for exemption, which fall into two primary categories: statutory exemptions and categorical exemptions. Statutory exemptions, established by the California Legislature, removes activities from the definition of “project” thereby completely exempting the activity from CEQA review. These activities include ministerial actions (e.g., issuing building permits), emergency projects (e.g., disaster response), and activities explicitly excluded by law. For instance, emergency repairs to roads following landslides or wildfires qualify for statutory exemptions under CEQA Guidelines Section 15269. Such exemptions are absolute and apply regardless of environmental impacts.

Categorical exemptions, outlined in CEQA Guidelines Sections 15301–15333, apply to classes of projects typically deemed to have minimal environmental impacts, such as minor land alterations, routine maintenance of existing facilities, or small-scale construction. Examples include replacing a commercial structure of less than 10,000 square feet or minor repairs to existing facilities. If the activity does not fall within a specific exemption, there is also a commonsense exemption which applies when a project’s environmental impacts are plainly nonexistent, such as administrative actions with no physical footprint.

Categorical exemptions are not absolute, however, as there are exceptions which apply if a project affects sensitive resources such as scenic highways, hazardous waste sites, or historical resources. For example, a minor land division that encroaches on a designated historic district would lose its categorical exemption. Lead agencies must carefully evaluate whether exemptions are appropriate, considering both the project’s characteristics and potential exceptions. If an exemption applies, the agency may proceed without further environmental documentation, though some jurisdictions require a notice of exemption (NOE) to be filed.

Initial Study and Scoping Determination

If a project is not exempt, the lead agency conducts an Initial Study (IS) to identify potential environmental effects. This preliminary assessment is described in a “CEQA Checklist,” which evaluates impacts across 18 environmental factors, including air quality, biological resources, cultural heritage, noise, traffic, greenhouse gas emissions, and fire impacts. This process also examines cumulative impacts when combined with past, present, or reasonably foreseeable projects. For instance, a proposed housing development might be assessed for its contribution to regional traffic congestion or habitat fragmentation when considered alongside nearby industrial expansions.

Based on the Initial Study’s findings, the lead agency prepares one of three environmental documents:

A Negative Declaration (ND) is issued if the study concludes the project will have no significant environmental impacts. *A Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND)* is used when identified impacts can be reduced to less-than-significant levels through enforceable measures, such as modifying construction schedules to protect nesting birds or installing noise barriers. These documents must be available for public review for 30 days before project approval, and the lead agency must respond to any comments received and file a Notice of Determination within five days of adopting the ND or MND.

For projects with unavoidable significant impacts, if significant impacts remain after mitigation, the agency must adopt a Statement of Overriding Considerations justifying the project’s benefits despite environmental costs. This statement might emphasize economic benefits,

housing needs, or public safety imperatives, as seen in approvals for critical infrastructure projects in fire-prone areas, and an *Environmental Impact Report (EIR)* is required. The EIR provides a comprehensive analysis of impacts, proposes mitigation strategies, and explores alternatives, including the “no project” option. Alternatives must achieve most of the project’s basic objectives while minimizing harm; for example, a highway expansion might consider route modifications or public transit enhancements as alternatives to reduce air pollution.

For projects requiring an Environmental Impact Report (EIR), a Notice of Preparation (NOP) is issued, initiating a 30-day comment period to identify key issues and alternatives. Scoping meetings may be held for complex projects, particularly those of regional significance, to ensure all concerns are addressed early in the process. This phase is critical for avoiding oversights and reducing litigation risks by incorporating diverse perspectives. The EIR preparation process includes a draft phase released for public review (typically 30–45 days) and a final phase incorporating responses to comments. For state-level projects, the draft EIR undergoes a 45-day review through the State Clearinghouse to coordinate agency feedback.

Public Review and Agency Decision

CEQA mandates transparency through public review periods, allowing community members, organizations, and agencies to submit comments on environmental documents. For EIRs, the review period is typically 30–45 days, while Negative Declarations require at least 20 days. During this phase, the lead agency must address substantive comments in writing, explaining how concerns were resolved or why they were dismissed. For example, if residents raise concerns about a project’s impact on local water quality, the agency might revise mitigation measures or provide additional data on groundwater monitoring. Note that during any of the pathways, the lead agency solicits input from other agencies, tribal governments, and the public to refine the analysis.

Final approval requires the agency to certify by making findings that the EIR or a Mitigated Negative Declaration accurately reflects the project’s environmental consequences and that mitigation measures are feasible.

Mitigation Measures and Alternatives

CEQA requires lead agencies to adopt all feasible measures to mitigate significant environmental impacts. Mitigation strategies include avoidance (e.g., rerouting a road to protect wetlands), minimization (e.g., using low-noise pavement), rectification (e.g., restoring degraded habitats), and compensation (e.g., funding off-site conservation easements). For example, a coastal development project might mitigate habitat loss by purchasing and preserving equivalent acreage elsewhere.

The law also mandates analysis of project alternatives that could achieve similar objectives with fewer impacts. Alternatives must be “feasible” and “capable of avoiding or substantially lessening environmental harm.” In urban infill projects, alternatives might include reducing building height, increasing green space, or incorporating renewable energy systems. The “no project” alternative serves as a baseline for comparison, illustrating the environmental consequences of inaction.

By integrating rigorous analysis, public engagement, and adaptive mitigation, the CEQA process ensures that environmental considerations remain central to California’s development trajectory while providing flexibility for projects with minimal impacts through well-defined exemptions.

CEQA Requirements for Fuel Reduction vs Bioeconomy Business Development

Fuel reduction projects enjoy access to multiple categorical exemption pathways beyond the commonly used Class 4 exemption. In addition, certain fuel reduction projects on federal lands may qualify for a statutory exemption under Public Resources Code Section 4799.05(d)(1), which applies to prescribed fire, thinning, and other fuel reduction activities that have completed NEPA review where the primary role of the state or local agency is to provide funding or staffing support. Emergency project exemptions under Section 15269(c) are available for fuel management activities that constitute "specific actions necessary to prevent or mitigate an emergency," where "emergency" is statutorily defined as "a sudden, unexpected occurrence, involving a clear and imminent danger, demanding immediate action to prevent or mitigate loss of, or damage to, life, health, property, or essential public services". This exemption is particularly applicable for fire or catastrophic risk mitigation around existing facilities, provided the threat is immediate and substantial rather than speculative or long-term. Each time such an exemption is used, the use must be documented and explained in order for the exemption to hold up under scrutiny.

There are several differences in what a wood products business faces in terms of environmental impacts and policy objectives, which leads to differing regulatory frameworks than fuel reduction projects. Although both types of projects are important to meet state climate and safety goals, fuel reduction initiatives are more straightforward rural impacts on forested lands, and the policy objectives are clear: reduce fire risk. As such, they are granted streamlined regulatory pathways and multiple environmental review exemptions to facilitate wildfire

prevention. Fuel reduction in most cases is treated as an emergency response activity deserving expedited regulatory treatment¹.

Enterprises that can handle wood waste disposal are largely treated as unrelated to the fuel reduction effort. This is because wood product businesses that use forest residue are one step removed from the work in the forest. While it is essential to drive markets and make entire projects feasible, sometimes their purpose is lost on those who are not following the issue. Also, some wood products businesses do have environmental impacts that must be mitigated. As such, they encounter more intricate commercial and industrial permitting processes, limited exemptions, and more extensive environmental review requirements²³. Despite this confusion about the value of wood utilization in some circles, the state's recognition that biomass residual waste management cannot solely be managed by prescribed fire or chip-and-scatter methods lead squarely to the need to develop other methods for disposal.

Wood product businesses contribute to climate goals and rural economic development but operate within a regulatory framework that emphasizes procedure over action. Recently proposed categorical exemptions for wood utilization facilities represent recognition that current CEQA requirements may impede beneficial biomass utilization projects⁴.

Categorical Exemptions

Fuel reduction projects enjoy access to multiple categorical exemption pathways beyond the commonly used Class 4 exemption. Some projects may qualify for statutory exemptions, as demonstrated by the documentation provided by a project manager or agency. Emergency project exemptions under Section 15269(c) are available for fuel management activities that constitute "specific actions necessary to prevent or mitigate an emergency," where "emergency" is statutorily defined as "a sudden, unexpected occurrence, involving a clear and imminent danger, demanding immediate action to prevent or mitigate loss of, or damage to, life, health, property, or essential public services". This exemption is particularly applicable for fire or catastrophic risk mitigation around existing facilities, provided the threat is immediate and substantial rather than speculative or long-term. Each time such an exemption is used, the use must be documented and explained in order for the exemption to hold up under scrutiny.

¹ [California Code of Regulations, Article 2, Section 1052 - Emergency Notice | California Code of Regulations | Justia](#)

² [California Streamlines CEQA for Housing and Public Projects](#)

³ [With growing fire risk, Governor Newsom proclaims state of emergency to fast-track critical wildfire prevention projects statewide | Governor of California](#)

⁴ [WFR May 2024 GovUpdate05_07.pdf](#)

Specific CEQA Issues with Bioeconomy Business Development

Several aspects of CEQA review are particularly important when developing bioeconomy projects in the City of Sonora that utilize forest residues, agricultural byproducts, or other biomass as feedstock. Air quality and greenhouse gas impacts typically warrant the greatest attention, as such facilities may generate criteria pollutant emissions and project-related greenhouse gases that must be evaluated against applicable CEQA significance thresholds.

Air quality analysis is critical because bioeconomy operations, including biomass processing, biofuel production, biochar generation, and agricultural waste conversion, may emit criteria air pollutants such as nitrogen oxides, particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), volatile organic compounds, carbon monoxide, and sulfur dioxide. These pollutants are subject to federal and state ambient air quality standards and may trigger CEQA significance thresholds depending on project scale, operational characteristics, and the attainment status of the applicable air basin. CEQA review must quantify construction-phase and operational emissions and evaluate whether those emissions would exceed applicable air district thresholds or result in a cumulatively considerable contribution to air quality impacts when combined with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects.

Lead agencies should consider the rural and working landscape context of Sonora when evaluating air quality impacts, including the limited concentration of permitted stationary sources and the presence of other rural commercial and resource-related activities. Cumulative impact determinations should therefore be based on a realistic assessment of existing emission sources, planned development, and foreseeable land use patterns within the county, rather than assumptions derived from urban or heavily industrialized regions. Construction-related fugitive dust, equipment exhaust, and emissions associated with material handling and vehicle trips must be carefully evaluated, with particular attention to truck traffic along state highways and local roadways that serve both industrial and residential uses.

Air quality analysis under CEQA must distinguish between emissions that are directly attributable to a proposed project and broader regional air quality conditions that are episodic or not causally related to project operations. While regional air quality events such as wildfire smoke may affect baseline conditions, CEQA requires that significance determinations and mitigation measures focus on emissions that can be reasonably attributed to the project itself. Mitigation measures should therefore address controllable sources, including construction practices, material handling, on-site equipment, and haul truck operations, through dust suppression, equipment standards, operational controls, and best available control technologies where required.

Greenhouse gas analysis is required for bioeconomy projects under CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.4 and must include a good-faith effort to quantify and evaluate project-related greenhouse gas emissions. This analysis should address emissions from construction activities, energy use, and vehicle traffic, and evaluate consistency with applicable state, regional, or local climate policies. For projects utilizing biomass feedstocks, the greenhouse gas analysis may also provide contextual information regarding alternative feedstock management pathways, such as open burning, pile disposal, or natural decomposition, to inform the assessment of the project's contribution to long-term greenhouse gas emissions. While CEQA does not require full lifecycle assessments in all cases, a qualitative discussion of avoided emissions and biogenic carbon dynamics may support a reasoned significance determination.

In addition to air quality and greenhouse gas impacts, bioeconomy projects in Sonora must be evaluated for potential effects on traffic, noise, water quality, biological resources, cultural resources, soils and geology, aesthetics, and hazards. Traffic analyses should account for increased vehicle trips associated with material delivery and product transport and their interaction with state highways and local roads. Noise assessments should evaluate construction noise and operational equipment impacts on nearby sensitive receptors. Water quality review should address stormwater runoff, erosion, and sedimentation risks associated with biomass storage and handling areas. Biological and cultural resource evaluations are necessary to identify and protect sensitive habitats and archaeological resources, while soil and geology analyses ensure safe grading and erosion control practices. Aesthetic analyses consider changes to visual character, and hazard evaluations examine fire risk, material storage, emergency access, and compliance with applicable fire and safety regulations.

Suggestion to Improve CEQA for Business Development

CEQA Exemption Application and Expansion

Statutory CEQA Exemptions for Advanced Manufacturing

In June 2025, Senate Bill 131 added Public Resources Code Section 21080.69(a)(4), creating a new statutory CEQA exemption for certain advanced manufacturing projects, including industrial biotechnology facilities as defined in Public Resources Code Section 26003. When applicable, this exemption eliminates the requirement to prepare an Environmental Impact Report and allows qualifying projects to proceed without full CEQA review. The exemption applies only to projects located exclusively on land zoned for industrial use and expressly excludes projects located on natural and protected lands, wetlands, prime farmland, hazardous waste sites, or projects involving oil and gas infrastructure or large warehouse distribution centers. The exemption took effect immediately upon enactment and is intended to expedite

development of specified clean technology and biomanufacturing facilities while maintaining restrictions on sensitive locations.

Because the exemption expressly includes industrial biotechnology and advanced manufacturing, certain bio industrial facilities that process or convert biomass feedstocks into fuels, chemicals, or bio-based products may qualify, provided all statutory siting and eligibility criteria are met. Projects that do not meet these requirements remain subject to standard CEQA review.

Limits of Categorical Exemptions and Regulatory Agency Actions

Certain categorical exemptions under the CEQA Guidelines apply only to actions taken by regulatory agencies and do not extend to project approvals sought by private or commercial applicants. For example, revisions adopted by air districts to implement or update permitting requirements for biomass boilers have relied on the Class 8 categorical exemption under CEQA Guidelines Section 15308, which applies to actions by regulatory agencies for the protection of the environment. This exemption may be used for rulemaking or permitting actions undertaken by an air district but does not apply to the approval of new bioenergy or wood products facilities proposed by private parties.

In addition, many existing categorical exemptions are limited to modifications of existing facilities and do not apply to the construction of new facilities. As a result, while limited exemption pathways exist for certain regulatory actions or facility upgrades, most new bioeconomy development projects must rely on statutory exemptions such as SB 131, where applicable, or proceed through standard CEQA review processes.

CEQA Process in the City of Sonora: What Applicants Should Know

In the City of Sonora, environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is conducted as part of the City's discretionary land use and permitting process and is administered through the Community Development Department. CEQA review occurs concurrently with project approvals rather than as a separate standalone process.

When an application is submitted, the City evaluates whether the proposed activity qualifies as a "project" under CEQA and whether it may be exempt under a statutory or categorical exemption. If an exemption applies, the City may proceed without further environmental documentation. If the project is not exempt, staff typically prepare or require preparation of an Initial Study to evaluate potential environmental impacts and determine whether a Negative Declaration, Mitigated Negative Declaration, or Environmental Impact Report is appropriate.

Environmental review is integrated with discretionary approvals such as use permits, variances, design review, and subdivisions. Depending on the nature of the project, approvals and

associated CEQA findings are made by the Planning Commission or the City Council. As a result, environmental review and land use decision-making occur together, and project timelines are influenced by both processes.

Unlike some surrounding jurisdictions, the City of Sonora does not utilize a fully integrated online permitting system. Application materials are generally accessed through the City's forms page and submitted via email or in person. Project review typically involves direct coordination with staff throughout the process, including follow-up on completeness, technical studies, and revisions.

Within the City's zoning framework, wood products and biomass-related uses are not always explicitly defined as standalone categories. Proposed projects are typically evaluated under broader commercial or limited industrial classifications and may require case-by-case interpretation to determine consistency with zoning and applicable permit requirements. This can influence both permitting pathways and the scope of CEQA review.

Projects involving bioeconomy or wood products activities may also require coordination with outside agencies, including the air district, fire authorities, and other regulatory entities, depending on project characteristics. These coordination steps may occur alongside CEQA review and can affect overall project timelines.

Environmental Review in the City of Sonora

Discretionary land use projects in the City of Sonora are subject to environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Environmental review occurs as part of the City's standard project approval process and is administered through the Community Development Department in accordance with the City's adopted CEQA Local Implementation Guidelines.

Projects that require discretionary approvals, such as use permits, site plan review, variances, subdivisions, or zoning amendments, are evaluated for CEQA compliance when an application is submitted. City staff review the project to determine whether environmental review is required and what level of analysis is appropriate. In many cases, this process begins with preparation of an Initial Study. The Initial Study evaluates potential environmental impacts and determines whether the project qualifies for a CEQA exemption or requires preparation of a Negative Declaration, Mitigated Negative Declaration, or Environmental Impact Report.

Environmental determinations are integrated into the City's broader land use review process. Depending on the type of approval required, projects may be reviewed by the Planning Commission or the City Council, which serve as the City's decision-making bodies for land use approvals and associated CEQA findings. Environmental review is therefore conducted concurrently with zoning and development review rather than as a separate permitting process.

For projects involving industrial activities such as manufacturing or wood processing, environmental review typically evaluates potential issues including traffic generation, noise, air quality, and site disturbance. The level of analysis required depends on the scale of the proposed operation, the location of the project site, and whether potential impacts can be addressed through mitigation measures or project design.

Local Ordinances Relevant to Vegetation Management and Wood Waste

The City of Sonora has adopted local defensible space requirements intended to reduce wildfire hazards within the city. Ordinance No. 835 established requirements for maintaining vegetation clearance around buildings and structures and requires property owners to remove combustible vegetation and maintain defensible space around structures.

These requirements are consistent with statewide wildfire safety standards and require ongoing vegetation management on developed properties. Vegetation removal associated with defensible space compliance can generate woody debris that must be disposed of, chipped, or otherwise managed in accordance with applicable regulations.

Open Burning Restrictions

The Sonora Municipal Code includes provisions regulating the burning of vegetation and other combustible materials within city limits. Open burning of weeds, brush, and similar materials is restricted and may only occur under authorized conditions that comply with fire safety and air quality requirements.

Because burning is limited within the city, property owners and contractors performing vegetation removal typically rely on alternative disposal methods such as chipping, hauling, or delivery to county waste management facilities.

Potential CEQA Process Improvements (For City of Sonora Consideration)

Clarify Permitting Pathways for Wood Products and Biomass Uses

The city could consider clarifying how wood products, biomass processing, and related uses fit within existing zoning classifications. This could include adding definitions or guidance materials that identify where these uses are allowed and what level of permit is typically required.

Benefit: Clearer zoning interpretation may reduce uncertainty for applicants, limit the need for case-by-case determinations, and improve consistency in project review.

Improve Early-Stage Application Guidance and Submittal Expectations

Because the City relies on a more manual, staff-driven permitting process, early clarity on submittal requirements can be especially important. The city could consider providing more detailed checklists or guidance materials outlining typical CEQA requirements, technical studies, and application components for discretionary projects.

Benefit: Clear upfront guidance may reduce incomplete applications, limit resubmittals, and improve overall processing timelines.

Formalize Pre-Application Coordination Practices

Applicants in Sonora often rely on informal coordination with staff to understand permitting and CEQA requirements. The city could consider formalizing a pre-application meeting process for discretionary projects, particularly those involving industrial or bioeconomy uses.

Benefit: Structured early coordination may help identify potential issues sooner, improve project design before formal submittal, and reduce delays during environmental review.

Expand Transparency Around CEQA Review Steps and Timelines

While CEQA review is integrated into the City's permitting process, the steps and expected timelines are not always clearly communicated to applicants. The city could consider providing a simple CEQA process overview tailored to local procedures, including typical review steps and approximate timeframes.

Benefit: Increased transparency may help applicants better understand the process, plan for project timelines, and reduce uncertainty during review.

Enhance Coordination with Responsible and Trustee Agencies

Projects involving biomass utilization or industrial activities often require coordination with agencies such as air districts or fire authorities. The city could consider developing guidance or internal coordination practices that help streamline this multi-agency review process.

Benefit: Improved coordination may reduce duplicative review, clarify agency roles, and support more efficient project processing.

General Plan and Zoning related to the Wood Products Businesses

The City of Sonora's General Plan and zoning regulations establish the framework for land uses within the city, including residential, commercial, and limited industrial activities. The General Plan provides policy direction for land use, development, and land use compatibility, and serves as the foundation for the City's zoning ordinance. Under California planning law, zoning regulations must remain consistent with the adopted General Plan land use designations. Through this framework, the General Plan identifies broad land use categories while the zoning

ordinance establishes the specific uses and development standards that apply to individual parcels.

Land use regulations for the City of Sonora are codified in Title 17 of the Sonora Municipal Code, which establishes zoning districts, permitted uses, and development standards. These zoning districts regulate where different types of activities may occur within the city and include residential, commercial, open space, and limited manufacturing classifications.

The zoning district most relevant to wood products manufacturing or processing activities is the Limited Manufacturing (ML) zone. The ML district is intended to accommodate light industrial, and manufacturing uses that are compatible with surrounding commercial and urban land uses. Uses allowed within the district include various forms of manufacturing, processing, repair, and service-related activities, subject to applicable development standards and permitting requirements.

The zoning ordinance does not specifically identify wood products manufacturing as a distinct land use category. However, small-scale wood processing, fabrication, or related activities could potentially fall within the broader category of light manufacturing or processing uses permitted within the ML district. Depending on the scale and operational characteristics of the proposed activity, additional review may be required to determine whether the use is consistent with zoning standards.

Projects involving manufacturing or processing activities may require discretionary approvals such as use permits or site plan review, particularly when the proposed use involves new construction, changes in land use, or potential operational impacts. These approvals are administered through the City's development review process and are typically evaluated by the Planning Commission or City Council depending on the nature of the approval required.

Location of Industrially Zoned Land

Industrial zoning within the City of Sonora is limited compared to residential and commercial districts. The City's zoning map identifies Limited Manufacturing (ML) as the primary zoning classification intended to accommodate manufacturing and industrial uses.

Most parcels zoned ML within the city are located along S. Washington, Hospital and Sanguinetti roads, the southern portion of the city near existing utility infrastructure and transportation corridors. This area contains the largest concentration of industrially zoned land within the incorporated city limits and represents the most likely location for manufacturing or processing activities within the city.

Industrial Land Availability

The relatively small amount of industrial zoning within Sonora reflects the city's historical development pattern as a commercial, residential, and governmental center rather than a major industrial hub. As a result, the number of parcels available for manufacturing uses within the incorporated city limits is limited.

Businesses seeking to establish wood products manufacturing or processing operations within the City of Sonora would therefore typically focus on parcels located within the ML zoning district or other areas where similar uses may be permitted subject to discretionary review. In some cases, manufacturing and wood processing operations associated with the Sonora area are located in unincorporated areas of Tuolumne County, where larger parcels and more extensive industrial zoning are available.

Taken together, the City of Sonora's General Plan policies and zoning ordinance establish a land use framework that allows certain manufacturing and processing activities within designated industrial areas while requiring discretionary review to ensure compatibility with surrounding land uses.

ATTACHMENT A

Key Contacts, Planning Portals, Fee Schedules, and Guidance Resources for the City of Sonora

The City of Sonora provides land use and permitting services through its Community Development Department, which integrates Planning, Building, and Code Enforcement functions. The city does not operate a fully integrated online permitting portal, and applications are generally submitted in person or via email, with direct coordination between applicants and staff.

City of Sonora Community Development Department (Planning and CEQA Lead Agency)

The Community Development Department serves as the primary point of contact for discretionary permits, zoning interpretation, General Plan implementation, and CEQA review. The Department manages use permits, variances, design review, subdivisions, and environmental review, and oversees both planning and building functions within the city.

- Website: <https://sonoraca.com/city-services/departments/community-development/>
- Phone: (209) 532-3508 ext. 2
- Email: permits@sonoraca.org
- Address: 94 N. Washington Street, Sonora, CA 95370

This page is the **most reliable central hub** for planning, building, and CEQA-related coordination.

Permit Applications and Forms (Primary Access Point)

The City provides application materials through a centralized forms page rather than a full online permitting system.

- Forms and Applications: <https://sonoraca.com/forms/>

This page includes use permits, variances, site plan review, subdivision applications, and other discretionary permit materials.

Although labeled “online permits,” applications are typically submitted manually via email or in person rather than through a full-service portal.

Building Department (Permitting and Inspections)

Building services are administered within the Community Development Department and include plan review, permit issuance, and inspections.

- Building Department (via Community Development):
<https://sonoraca.com/city-services/departments/community-development/>

Inspections are scheduled directly with staff and are typically available on limited days (e.g., Tuesdays and Thursdays).

Fee Schedules and Cost Information

The City of Sonora does not maintain a single consolidated fee schedule webpage. Fee information is instead provided through application materials and direct coordination with staff.

- Fee information is available within forms and application materials:
<https://sonoraca.com/forms/>

Applicants should confirm current fees directly with staff, as costs vary based on project scope, level of review, and required environmental documentation.

Municipal Code and Development Regulations

The City's zoning and development standards are established in the Sonora Municipal Code, which governs allowable uses, permit requirements, and development standards.

- Municipal Code: <https://sonora.municipalcodeonline.com/>
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Zoning Maps and Land Use Information

Zoning maps and land use materials are available through the City's website.

- Zoning Map (primary access page):
<https://sonoraca.com/city-services/departments/community-development/attachment/city-zoning-map/>

This page provides access to the City's zoning map and land use information for project planning.

Planning Commission (Public Hearings and Decisions)

The Planning Commission conducts public hearings and acts on discretionary land use applications, including use permits, variances, and design reviews.

- Commission and Meetings (via City site):
<https://sonoraca.com/city-services/departments/>

Planning Commission activities are administered through the Community Development Department and City Council/commission structure.

Practical Use of City Resources

In practice, applicants typically begin by contacting the Community Development Department to confirm zoning, permitting requirements, and CEQA pathways. Applications are then submitted via email or in person, with ongoing coordination required between applicants and staff. Due to the City's small size and limited staffing, the permitting process is more manual than in surrounding jurisdictions, and early communication with staff is important to clarify submittal expectations, timelines, and review requirements.

ATTACHMENT B

Getting Started in the City of Sonora: CEQA Frequently Asked Questions

When does CEQA apply to my project in Sonora?

CEQA applies when a project requires discretionary approval from the City, such as a use permit, variance, design review, subdivision, or zoning change. Ministerial permits, such as standard building permits that meet existing code requirements, are typically exempt from CEQA.

Who is the lead agency for CEQA review?

For projects within city limits, the City of Sonora typically acts as the lead agency and is responsible for determining the appropriate level of CEQA review and preparing or reviewing environmental documentation.

How do I know if my project is exempt from CEQA?

The City will evaluate whether your project qualifies for a statutory or categorical exemption after an application is submitted. Many smaller or less intensive projects may qualify, but exemptions depend on project-specific details and whether any exceptions apply.

What happens if my project is not exempt?

If a project is not exempt, the city will require an Initial Study to evaluate potential environmental impacts. Based on that analysis, the project may proceed with a Negative Declaration, Mitigated Negative Declaration, or, in some cases, an Environmental Impact Report.

Do I need to prepare CEQA documents myself?

For smaller projects, the city may prepare environmental documentation. For more complex projects, applicants are often required to hire a qualified consultant to prepare technical studies or CEQA documents under City direction.

How long does the CEQA process take?

Timelines vary depending on project complexity, completeness of the application, and level of environmental review. Exempt projects may move relatively quickly, while projects requiring technical studies or environmental documents may take several months or longer.

How do I submit an application in Sonora?

Applications are typically accessed through the City's forms page and submitted via email or in person. The city does not currently use a fully integrated online permitting system, so direct coordination with staff is part of the process.

Will I need to coordinate with other agencies?

Possibly. Projects involving air emissions, fire safety, water quality, or other environmental factors may require coordination with agencies such as the local air district, fire authorities, or state agencies. These steps often occur alongside CEQA review.

What are the most common issues that slow down projects?

Delays are often related to incomplete applications, missing technical studies, or the need for additional information during CEQA review. Early coordination with City staff can help identify these issues before formal submittal.

ATTACHMENT C

Prepare Your CEQA Submittal: Applicant Checklist (City of Sonora)

Before submitting a discretionary project application in the City of Sonora, applicants may consider preparing the following:

Basic Project Information

- Project description (clear and concise)
- Site location and Assessor's Parcel Number (APN)
- Site plan showing layout, access, and surrounding uses.
- Description of proposed operations (hours, equipment, traffic, etc.)

Land Use and Zoning

- Confirmation of zoning designation
- Description of how the project is consistent with allowed uses.
- Identification of required permits (e.g., use permit, design review)

CEQA and Environmental Information

- Preliminary assessment of potential environmental impacts
- Identification of whether an exemption may apply.
- Initial discussion with City staff regarding CEQA pathway.

Technical Studies (as applicable)

Depending on the project, the city may require:

- Air quality analysis
- Traffic analysis
- Noise assessment
- Biological or cultural resource review
- Water quality or drainage analysis

Early coordination with staff can help determine which studies are necessary.

Operational Details

- Estimated truck trips and delivery schedules.
- Equipment and processing activities
- Materials handling and storage
- Energy use and emissions sources

Agency Coordination (if applicable)

- Air district consultation (for emissions or combustion equipment)
- Fire authority review (for defensible space, access, or fire risk)
- Utility coordination (water, wastewater, power)

Application Materials and Submittal

- Completed City application forms.
- Required plans and supporting documents.
- Application fee (confirmed with City staff)
- Submission via email or in person

Pre-Application Coordination (Recommended)

- Contact Community Development staff early.
- Discuss project concept and potential issues.
- Confirm submittal requirements and CEQA expectations.

Benefit: Early coordination may reduce incomplete applications, clarify expectations, and improve overall processing timelines.