

Navigating the California Environmental Quality Act for Wood Product and Bioenergy Businesses



The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is a powerful environmental protection tool that can be a complicated barrier to land development in California. Therefore, a [CEQA Handbook for Bioenergy and Wood Products Businesses](#) has been developed to help guide project developers, land use staff, local government leaders, and other interested parties through the CEQA process. The insights and strategies outlined in this handbook are especially relevant to bioenergy and wood products businesses using forest biomass. They may also be beneficial for bioenergy projects using wood from other sectors and for forest fuel reduction projects.

By understanding the regulatory landscape, overcoming CEQA hurdles, and leveraging available tools and exemptions, bioenergy and wood products businesses can achieve sustainable, rural economic development; help improve forest health, which results in improved air quality and increased water retention; and contribute to state climate goals.

Handbook Highlights

1. Leverage Available Exemptions

Understand and utilize categorical and statutory exemptions applicable to bioenergy and wood product projects. Several exemptions that may apply are addressed and could be used when it can be demonstrated that no exceptions to using such exemption apply.

2. Utilize Special CEQA Pathways

Take advantage of special CEQA avenues such as the California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP). This program can provide baseline information for the impact analysis for some projects, which can significantly reduce the review burden for qualifying projects.

3. Address GHG Emissions Strategically

Create a robust approach to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions analysis that accounts for both short-term and long-term carbon benefits. Recent court cases have shown that certain GHG thresholds can be legally defensible when supported by substantial evidence and rigorous analysis. Consider lifecycle emissions to properly reflect the overall climate benefits.

4. Coordinate CEQA and NEPA Processes

For projects utilizing federal grant money, understand how to efficiently prepare joint documents that satisfy both CEQA and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. This coordination can reduce duplication of effort and inconsistencies between state and federal environmental reviews.

5. Engage with Public Agencies

Build relationships with public agencies and explore public funding opportunities that may come with streamlined review processes. These relationships can be crucial tools in navigating CEQA challenges, particularly for projects aligned with state forest management goals.

6. Feedstock Sourcing Considerations

In some cases, projects will need to analyze the impacts of the removal of the feedstock that will be used. When that is necessary, considerations of the Forest Practices Act and previous environmental review will be useful.

7. Implement Effective Public Outreach

Invest in comprehensive public outreach early in the project development process to identify and address potential concerns before they become formal CEQA challenges. Building community support can be invaluable in navigating the review process successfully.