

FUTURE OF ORBOST & DISTRICT PROJECT

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Exploring the Potential of Biochar in Orbost & District's Future

The Future of Orbost & District project recently brought together key local stakeholders, technology suppliers, and specialists to explore ways to make better use of local biomass resources. These biomass sources include agricultural residues from the district's thriving corn seed industry, tree services, municipal green waste, and biosolids, with a particular focus on biochar production.

Biochar is a type of charcoal made by heating organic materials, such as wood or crop waste, at high temperatures with limited oxygen. It has significant environmental benefits, such as improving soil health by retaining water, enhancing nutrient availability, and promoting beneficial microbes. Biochar also plays a role in combating climate change by sequestering carbon. Additionally, biochar production generates biogas and heat as renewable energy sources, alongside other valuable by-products like wood vinegars.

Ms. Liz Mitchell, Chair of the FoOD Project's Governance Group, emphasized the importance of biochar as an opportunity being explored by the project's Agricultural Innovation Working Group. "Biochar is exciting because it could support a local bio-economy and circular economy principles by converting what is often seen as waste into valuable resources," said Ms. Mitchell.

Participants heard from Linda and John Ballis, who lead a renewable energy park in Yarram that also produces biochar. They shared insights into the collaborative approach, community benefits, and circular economy principles that underpin their project.

The group also heard from the Australian representative of Puro.earth, a global marketplace for carbon removal. Puro.earth connects businesses with verified carbon removal projects, focusing on solutions like biochar that permanently capture CO₂ from the atmosphere. These projects help companies offset emissions and promote sustainable practices, while the generation of Carbon Removal Certificates (CORCs) creates a valuable income stream. These CORCs are rigorously verified, ensuring both environmental and social safeguards, as well as net-negative emissions guarantees.

Ms. Mitchell concluded that collaboration is essential. "We need to foster local, national, and global partnerships to explore innovative ways to transform our local economy and support our community while contributing to net-zero targets. Today's forum was a great step forward, and we'll continue discussions on how to advance these ideas through pilot-scale activities."

The Future of Orbost & District project responds to the challenges posed by the end of native timber harvesting in Victoria's state forests, focusing on transitioning the local economy. Its goal is to build on Orbost and District's existing strengths and leverage opportunities for positive economic, social, and

environmental outcomes. The project receives support from the Victorian Government's Forestry Transition Program's Community Stream until September 2025.

The Orbost and District Chamber of Commerce and Industry has an agreement with the Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) to deliver the Future of Orbost & District project, which is overseen by a community-led governance group.

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Participants in the room at the recent Future of Orbost & District biochar forum