

Regional Digester Possible

By P.J. Reilly

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - Staff Writer

Farmers are always looking for new ways to make a buck.

And here in Lancaster County, farmers are bracing for new environmental regulations they expect to be dumped on them - which would take away many of the bucks they already have - in the name of cleaning the Chesapeake Bay.

Could a regional digester, which would take manure from area farms and convert it into electricity and other sellable products while cleaning up the environment, help local farmers on both fronts?

Lancaster County commissioners today are expected to vote to commission a feasibility study to find out.

"This really is an exciting project, and I'm hopeful this study will come back showing us that the business model will work and that we can find a location in Lancaster County and really make a great impact on a couple different levels," Commissioner Craig Lehman said.

The commissioners have secured grants totaling \$62,000 from the state Department of Environmental Protection, Chesapeake Bay Commission and Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment to fund the study.

They plan to hire the Herbert, Rowland and Grubic engineering firm for \$62,000 to find out if there's a sufficient concentration of cows in one or more parts of Lancaster County to support such a facility; where such concentrations exist; where a digester could be built; and if it's economically feasible for a private company to build and operate one in the county.

In an unrelated development, West Lampeter Township planners have scheduled a meeting next month on a possible digester project that would process manure from multiple farms in that area.

Last year, the commissioners listened to a presentation by engineers from Herbert, Rowland and Grubic, who outlined how the Cove Area Regional Digester that's under construction in Blair County is supposed to operate.

The Cove area is home to some 25,000 dairy cows that produce about 200 tons

of manure every day.

Years of applying that manure directly to farm fields has elevated the amount of nitrogen in local streams and water supplies to alarming levels.

The digester project was borne out of a desire to curb the introduction of nitrogen into groundwater and streams and to find new revenue streams for local farmers.

Once it's operational, the facility would take in manure from surrounding farms and break it down.

Methane gas from the digestion process would be harnessed and fed into an engine that generates electricity - 2.2 megawatts every day.

That power would be used on site to power the plant, and it would be sold for use in the region.

Also produced in the breakdown process would be about 17,000 tons of bedding and/or soil additives that can be sold each year.

Other potential revenue would result from the accumulation of federal and state credits for prudent nutrient management and generating renewable energy, which could be sold as well.

The farmers who provide manure to the digester would share in any revenues generated, which was estimated at \$320 per cow per year.

While the digester is making money for farmers, it also is expected to reduce:

Nitrogen reaching groundwater and surface water by 579,000 pounds per year.

Phosphorous reaching groundwater and surface water by 25,000 pounds per year.

Ammonia released into the atmosphere by 506,000 pounds per year.

Scott Russell of Herbert, Rowland and Grubic said he expects the feasibility study in Lancaster County to commence immediately and could be finished within four months.

He said there are several investors ready to pursue the project if the feasibility study is favorable, but he declined to identify them.

preilly@lnpnews.com

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