



Dairy CARES Report

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CARB makes right call on dairy biogas digester policy

California dairy farmers are no stranger to innovation. In fact, innovation helped Golden State dairies to become the nation's leaders in productivity, quality and efficiency. Willingness of California dairy families to support research, adopt improved management practices for cattle health and comfort, and minimize environmental impacts all have helped keep our dairies on the leading edge of environmental and economic sustainability.

Yet, as California appears to be evolving from the "Golden State" to the "Green State," it's good for us to remember that not every good idea works everywhere, all the time. And some good ideas need nurturing in the real world to help them grow and ripen. A case in point is dairy digesters, which extract biogas from manure to generate renewable green power, while also reducing the overall carbon footprint even further for already-efficient California dairies.

California dairies are leaders in developing biogas digesters with about 30 dairies participating in digester projects statewide. Some dairies deliver their manure to a centralized "regional" digester, while others operate digesters right on their farm, using the renewable energy to offset their own costs, and often replacing fossil fuel-powered pumps with clean electric pumps, while selling the excess electricity to help power neighboring homes and businesses.

With all those benefits, it's no wonder digesters capture the imagination of many people in and outside of California. Yet caution is warranted with this combination of new technology and a new economic model that goes with it. Digesters are quite expensive to build and operate, require careful, expert maintenance, and have a limited track record in California.

CARES has warned policy makers in the past of the pitfalls of viewing digesters as a "silver bullet." So it's important this week to recognize the staff of the California Air Resources Board for their balanced and responsible approach to manure digesters in the "Climate Change Draft Scoping Plan" released for public review June 26.

To comply with the Assembly Bill 32, the "California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006," the draft scoping plan proposes reducing the state's greenhouse gas emissions by 169 million metric tons from so-called "business-as-usual" levels by 2020.

The CARB draft report wants about 0.6 percent of that 169 million tons to come from the dairy industry through implementation of digester projects. But the report recognizes that for now, the best way to get the job done is through continuing to provide incentives and encouragement for further adoption of this technology.

Many who discuss "requiring" digesters to be installed on dairies fail to understand the economic and technical basics. By definition, a sustainable business must be environmentally *and* economically sustainable. Failing on either point means the model cannot last.

It's true that much of the technology related to dairy digester is maturing, thanks to the past efforts of brave dairy families, researchers and collaborators who stepped forward to try, and often initially fail, then persevere to make improvements and eventually advance the technology. Many are still working hard to improve the technology further, and identify opportunities for further cost-effectiveness. We are beginning to see projects in California where manure is co-digested with agricultural/food wastes to make the process more efficient and cost-effective. Others are exploring the possibility of using biogas as a transportation fuel.

But the complex economics surrounding moving electricity into California's highly regulated grid and also meeting strict environmental regulations, including air quality regulation related to digester biogas engines, is far from mature. Optimism is high, and many are working to improve the situation and overcome the current obstacles.

CARB puts this succinctly in its report: "Encouraging the capture of methane through the use of manure digester systems at large dairies will provide early voluntary emission reductions ... initially, economic incentives such as marketable emission reduction credits, favorable utility contracts or renewable energy incentives will be needed."

This balanced approach is reflective of the vision stated in the report that California, by being on the cutting edge of greenhouse gas reduction, will be economically rewarded rather than punished. We can only hope for now that this will be true, but CARB's initial vision of a "carrot" approach rather than a stick is a good start.

CARES is a statewide coalition supporting economic and environmental sustainability for California's dairy industry. CARES members include the Alliance of Western Milk Producers, Bank of the West, Bar 20 Dairy Farms, California Dairies Inc., California Dairy Campaign, California Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America-California, Dairy Institute of California, Hilmar Cheese Co., HP Hood, Joseph Gallo Farms, Land O' Lakes, Milk Producers Council, Saputo Cheese, Turlock Dairy & Refrigeration, Western United Dairymen, and others. For information about CARES, visit our web site at www.dairycares.com, write dairycares@aol.com or call 916-441-3318.