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Stanislaus farm to run on manure

Fiscalini gets a state grant to install methane digester

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By JOHN HOLLAND
BEE STAFF WRITER

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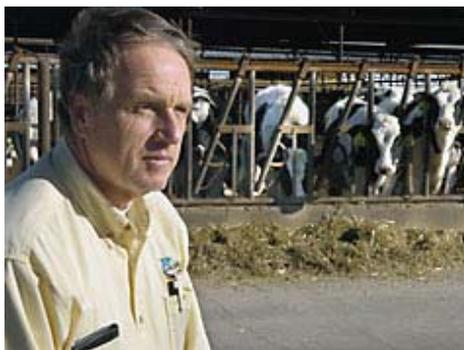
The Fiscalini family's dairy cows, already famous for their cheese, soon will be known for the energy they produce.

The Kiernan Avenue farm has received a state grant for a system that extracts methane from manure and burns the gas to make electricity. It would be the first such system in the Modesto Irrigation District, which might buy some of the power.

John Fiscalini, co-owner of Fiscalini Farmstead Cheese and about 3,000 head of cattle, said the system will meet his energy needs while disposing of the manure.

His is one of nine farms chosen for a second round of dairy-gas grants from the California Energy Commission.

"It could be a very significant source of renewable energy and reduce our dependence on



John Fiscalini hopes to have the methane digester running by October. It will power production of milk and cheese as well as hot water for the farm.

JOAN BARNETT LEE/THE BEE

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fossil fuels as well," said Michael Marsh, chief executive officer of Western United Dairymen.

The Modesto-based group helped arrange for these systems, known as digesters, and 10 others in the first round.

The systems already operating produce about 2.5 megawatts of electricity; the new ones would produce about 1.3 megawatts more. That's a tiny part of the state's demand, which peaked at about 50,000 megawatts in the worst of last summer's heat.

But several things point to growth in cow power: The state has about 1.7 million dairy cows, about a third of them in the Northern San Joaquin Valley, and each drops about 120 pounds of waste a day.

Farmers are under pressure to keep the waste from polluting air and water. And they want to control their energy costs, especially in times of low milk prices.

Dairy digesters already in place include one at Joseph Gallo Farms, a major cheese-maker near Atwater, and another near Lodi. The projects getting the new grants range from Butte to Imperial counties, but Fiscalini's is the only one in the Northern San Joaquin Valley.

Grant is worth \$720,000

Fiscalini, who produces award-winning cheese at his family's 93-year-old farm, is getting about \$720,000 toward the nearly \$2.5 million cost of his digester.

The system, which must be completed by the end of this year, will have a large, airtight tank that holds the manure.

"You want to grow a very healthy group of bacteria in there," Fiscalini said. "The bacteria break down the manure, and one of the byproducts is methane."

Burning the methane will produce 0.65 megawatts of electricity for milk and cheese production and for possible sale to the MID, he said.

The process also will provide hot water for on-site use. The remaining solids from the manure could be used as fertilizer or sterile cattle bedding, Fiscalini said.

The digester also will consume whey, the thin liquid left after curds are removed from milk and made into cheese, he said.

Fiscalini plans to meet Monday with the MID on the prospects for selling surplus power. The district could use it for its electrical customers or relay it to a utility elsewhere, but no terms have been discussed, MID spokeswoman Maree Hawkins said.

"We are encouraged by the possibility of connecting any renewable resource to our system," she said.

The Energy Commission's dairy-gas program is separate from an effort to

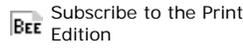
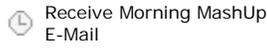
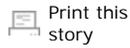
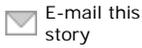


produce methane on dairy farms and send it into natural gas pipelines owned by Pacific Gas & Electric Co. Joseph Gallo Farms is taking part in that effort, too.

Methane from dairies also could be used in vehicles now powered by natural gas from petroleum deposits, said Allen Dusault, a program director for Sustainable Conservation, a San Francisco environmental group that works with valley farmers.

"If we can capture methane and turn pollution into a solution for our vehicles, that's tremendously advantageous," he said.

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