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Dairymen, utility representatives and environmentalists gathered in Sacramento on Tuesday to paint a picture of a promising future of biomethane production.

Biomethane derived from livestock waste could one day be a valuable resource for dairy farmers

The first National Biomethane Summit, organized by the California Natural Gas Vehicle Partnership, brought executives and activists from across the country.

Biomethane is now poised to expand into vehicle fuel, a development that will carry the industry to a new level, said Allen Dusault, a program director with Sustainable Conservation, an organization that aids green-development projects, mostly in agriculture.

"The environmental benefits really are powerful," Dusault said. "There isn't any source of renewable fuel that I know of that has the environmental benefits that you have from using biomethane."

Emerging technology soon to be brought to market - including a commercial facility set to come on line this year in California - constitutes a "game changer," Dusault said.

"We don't have the food-for-fuel trade-off," Dusault said. "But ... we need the collaborations between the environmental and agricultural communities, and other sectors, if we're going to make these facilities happen."

"We need agencies to be working with us," he said. "What I have seen to date, in terms of upper levels of state government, (are) lots of meetings, lots of conversations, but that has not translated into changes on the ground."

Paul Martin, environmental services director with Western United Dairymen, said the regulatory process, littered with obstacles in the past, is showing promise for greater efficiency.

"A lot of us have been involved and caught in some of the rules, (and) tempers flared," Martin said. "But everybody has taken a step back, and discussions are starting to happen on a more pragmatic scale now."

"Think innovation," Martin said. "That's really what we're going to have to do. We've got a (Nitrogen oxide) issue in the San Joaquin Valley, so let's be innovative. Let's think of different ways to do things, whether it's ... better engines, whether it's pipeline injection, whether it's vehicle fuels. Tailor what we're going to do to the local constraints that we're faced with."

Kenneth Brennan, senior project manager with Pacific Gas and Electric Company, said the utility has a high interest in biomethane from dairies. That's largely to comply with state rules requiring a renewable-fuel minimum in utilities' portfolios.

"The utilities are known for being somewhat time-consuming and difficult to deal with sometimes," Brennan said. "My job is to make sure that these projects happen. We are very interested in buying that gas."

While the industry for dairy biogas grows, it can help create a better economic cushion for the state's dairies, said Martin of Western United Dairymen. Current economic straits in the industry might make new investments unmanageable, he said, but they may also stimulate improvements in the regulatory processes that have hindered project development in the past.

"We're kind of in a unique period of time in the dairy industry where there's no money to invest anyhow, so maybe this is a good time to kind of cool things off a little bit and try to come up with some solutions," he said.

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