



CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

California Regional Water Quality Control Board Central Valley Region

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STATE AND LOCAL AGENCIES TURN FOCUS TO PROMOTING RENEWABLE ENERGY FROM DAIRY WASTE THROUGHOUT THE CENTRAL VALLEY

An effort involving water, energy, and air regulators, and agriculture could result in more energy for the state, less waste material from dairies, and fewer greenhouse gas emissions from the Central Valley. In addition, an environmental impact report process could result in emissions in a simpler permit application process for Valley dairy operators to operate anaerobic digestion facilities.

The Central Valley is home to over 80 percent of California dairies. This translates into 1.9 million mature cows generating approximately 47 million tons of manure waste each year. Manure is a waste that can create air and water quality challenges throughout the Valley; however, manure can also be used as a source of alternative, renewable energy. Promoting and increasing renewable energy is a benefit for the environment, a benefit for all Californians and a high priority for Governor Schwarzenegger. Executive Order S-14-08 directs State agencies to reduce permit processing time for renewable energy projects by at least 50 percent. Anaerobic digestion facilities that use only dairy manure and dairy manure blended with other organic wastes as fuel are renewable energy projects.

To meet the Governor's directive, the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Board), as the lead agency, has partnered with other state and local agencies to prepare a Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for anaerobic manure digestion and co-digestion facilities. The EIR will pave the way for a streamlined environmental permitting process for state and local agencies. It will be used by the Regional Board to support the adoption of a General Waste Discharge Requirement Order (WDR) for dairy manure digester and co-digester projects in the Central Valley that will protect the environment and significantly reduce the water quality permit processing time.

Dairy manure digesters capture methane gas, a byproduct of cattle manure, for generating electricity or other uses of natural gas. Methane is one of the greenhouse gases blamed for global warming. Along with manure, co-digesters also convert agricultural and food processing waste, green waste, and fats, oils and grease into energy. Manure can also be a significant source of nitrates in groundwater. The EIR will evaluate alternatives to ensure waste products from digester facilities are protective of water quality. Digesters and Co-digesters can allow dairies to cut greenhouse gas emissions, reduce impacts to water quality and produce a source of renewable energy, creating what many believe is a win-win-win for dairies, natural resources and the environment.

Adoption of the Programmatic EIR will expedite the environmental permitting and regulation of manure digester and co-digester projects within the Central Valley for many state and local agencies. Working cooperatively with the Regional Board to develop the EIR are: California's State Water Resources Control Board; Air Resources Board; the Department of Food and Agriculture; the Energy Commission; the Public Utilities Commission; the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District; the Department of Resources, the California Environmental Protection Agency; and Recycling and Recovery. In addition, a Technical Advisory Group will be formed to assist in the development of the EIR. Members of the group will include representatives of state and local agencies; dairy, energy and utility industries, and environmental and environmental justice organizations.

The EIR could reduce water quality permitting time by at least 75 percent and air quality permitting time by at least 50 percent, for certain digester projects. California has set a goal of achieving 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions by 2020. In two executive orders, Governor Schwarzenegger has called for the promotion and production of biofuels and biopower.

"The introduction of more digesters and co-digesters into Central Valley dairies, through a cooperative and expedited permitting process, could ultimately result in improved water quality, which is the main focus of the State Water Board," said Central Valley Regional Water Board Executive Officer Pamela Creedon. A General Order is also consistent with a State Water Board resolution calling for improvement in permitting consistency for digester facilities and more prompt reviews of CEQA documents associated with dairy digester facilities. Anaerobic digestion, through the use of digesters and co-digesters, is a wastewater treatment process, which reduces the nutrient and organic load of dairy waste discharge to land, although it does not eliminate the need for further treatment.

"This is a perfect example of agriculture creating environmental solutions from the land," said California Department of Food & Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura. "The dairy industry already knows that digesters are important - they address several issue areas on farms. We applaud this development as a major step in introducing digester options to a greater segment of the industry."

Cal/EPA Undersecretary Cindy Tuck said, "Encouraging the production of renewable energy from dairy waste is in perfect alignment with Governor Schwarzenegger's commitment to actively addressing the issue of climate change. And, the use of digesters and co-digesters to turn methane from dairy manure into renewable energy source helps protect the environment and support California's vital rural economy.

Support was also forthcoming from a variety of other officials: "Capturing methane emissions from the state's dairies to use as a fuel source helps air quality, water quality and provides us with a powerful tool in our fight against climate change," said Air Resources Board Chairman Mary D. Nichols. "Projects like this also produce jobs in rural parts of the state that are especially hard hit by the economic downturn."

“Using the biogas produced from dairy digesters is simply an energy smart idea,” said California Energy Commission Vice Chair Jim Boyd. “By utilizing existing resources found at dairies, California stands to benefit from converting methane-rich biogas into electricity. It will help the state achieve its goals of 20 percent of biopower used in the renewable energy portfolio as recommended in the Energy Commission’s 2009 Integrated Energy Policy Report,” Boyd added.

"We are pleased to be a part of this important effort," said Seyed Sadredin, Executive Director of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. "Our hope is that this work will serve as a model for efficient and effective public, private, and multi-agency coordination."

Other possible benefits of digesters and co-digesters include a more diversified energy supply, improved energy security, enhanced economic development, and job development. Valley dairy farmers, faced with difficult economic times and increasing environmental pressures, believe the widespread use of digesters could help sustain the Central Valley’s dairy industry and provide a new revenue stream for dairies from green, renewable energy.

