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Policy changes would spur use of manure to generate energy

Process offers multiple benefits: clean water, energy production, and farm sustainability

A report released today by the tri-state Chesapeake Bay Commission points to near-term policy reforms that would encourage projects that convert manure to energy and ensure the Chesapeake Bay region could gain the triple benefits of the process -- renewable energy, increased farm income, and improved water quality for the region's rivers and the Bay.

Parts of the Chesapeake region are centers for poultry, hog, and dairy operations, all of which generate large amounts of manure. Farmers use the manure as fertilizer, a good use so long as the nutrients can be taken up by crops and not allowed to enter streams, rivers, and the Bay. In many areas, though, there is more manure than can be applied appropriately to the surrounding land, and because it is difficult and expensive to transport manure to distant farms that may productively use it, disposal becomes a problem.

With increasing pressure on farmers and local governments to reduce nutrient flow to the Bay to meet the federal "pollution diet" set for the Chesapeake Bay, the Chesapeake Bay Commission is promoting the adoption of manure-to-energy projects that provide an alternative to land application of manure, especially in areas of intense animal production.

A variety of technologies that convert manure to energy have been widely used and proved effective. They can produce heat, methane gas, and electricity and the nutrient rich byproducts of the process can be more readily transported to areas that need fertilizers.

"We have identified over a dozen policy changes that would boost adoption of this technology, and now our Commission members are looking at which ones will work best in our respective states." said State Senator Emmett Hanger (VA, dist.24), a Commission member who represents the poultry and dairy-rich region of the Shenandoah Valley. "It is truly a win-win situation. Manure-to-energy offers an alternative energy source for the farmer while, at the same time, reducing the farm's pollutant load. No other energy source does both."

Some farmers in the area have already begun investing in the technologies and recently Maryland issued a request for proposals for a bioenergy plant that is specifically powered by manure. To get more projects on the ground in the watershed, the report, which was created in coordination with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Maryland Technology Development Corporation and Farm Pilot Project and funded by the Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment, identified 14 policy changes to assist market entry, finance the projects for maximum benefit including water quality benefits, and support the effective use of by-products. It highlighted five. They are:

- Provide incentives for manure-based energy in the states' Renewable Portfolio Standards, similar to the incentives provided for solar energy. For example: Set a specific measurable requirement for the purchase of manure-based energy by utilities.
- Increase alternative energy compliance payments for the purchase of manure based energy that addresses water quality goals. Establish a credit multiplier for utilities that purchase manure-based energy.

- Encourage long-term power purchase agreements for manure-based energy.
- Prioritize outreach, funding, and technical assistance for manure-to-energy projects that also address water quality issues.
- Ensure that nutrient management planning fully accounts for the import and export of nutrients in manure-to-energy by-products as they move from one farm to another.
- Clearly classify manure as a “non-waste” instead of a “solid waste” for the purposes of air permitting.

With estimates from the EPA Bay Program showing 36 percent of excess phosphorus and 15 percent of the excess nitrogen in the Bay coming from manure, State Senator Michael Brubaker (PA, dist.36), Chairman of the Chesapeake Bay Commission, noted the opportunities inherent in manure to energy projects.

“Innovation will be key to helping us meet our local and Bay water quality goals,” Brubaker said. We should promote the technologies that provide multiple benefits, such as renewable energy and valuable byproducts.”

Support for manure to energy efforts is gaining momentum with farm, environmental and energy advocates all interested in expanding the options.

“Finding viable alternative uses for excess manure is a key component of Bay-wide clean-up efforts,” said Chesapeake Bay Foundation Senior Scientist Dr. Beth McGee. “We must promote policies that will lead to wider adoption of manure to energy technologies if we are to achieve our mutual goals of clean water and a strong agricultural economy.”

The Chesapeake Bay Commission is a tri-state policy leader for sound and equitable solutions to restore Chesapeake Bay.

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