

Kings County dairy goes cleaner

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Facility invests in clean-air pilot program

The Philip Verway Dairy several miles south of Hanford has all the hallmarks of a well-run operation — clean buildings, a carefully-manicured lawn and minimal odor.

Now it can add electric feed mixers to the list.

The 10,000-cow operation is implementing a demonstration air-pollution-reduction project that's putting Verway Farms at the forefront of local dairy innovation.

The new installation — electric-powered feed mixers to replace a higher-polluting diesel setup — drew a crowd of dairy farmers, politicians, reporters and air district officials Wednesday to learn more about it.

According to calculations made by San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District employees, the switch to the electric system on the dairy will annually cut 22 tons of nitrogen oxide emissions, 2.2 tons of fine particulate matter, 1 ton of hydrocarbons and 648 tons of carbon dioxide.

The huge feeds mixers process tons of carefully combined ingredients daily to keep Verway running around the clock.

A written statement from the district said the project will conserve 90,000 gallons of diesel that would otherwise have been burned annually.

Nitrogen oxides produce smog (ozone), which is harmful to the lungs. Fine particulate matter, also known as PM2.5, can exacerbate and even cause lung disease.

Currently, dairies aren't required to convert to electric mixers, but officials see the Verway project as the wave of the future.

"If this project is successful ... the ability to multiply this at dairies throughout the region could have a major impact," said Tulare County Supervisor Steven Worthley.

The project cost \$1.15 million. Of that, the district provided \$300,000 through a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Verway Farms paid for the rest.

That may not sound like a great deal for Verway given the fact that electricity costs in California are already high compared to the national average and are expected to go higher.

However, according to Frank Cardoza, Verway Farms manager, the dairy will build a methane digester next year to generate its own electricity.

Methane digesters trap methane gas from cow manure and burn it to produce electric power. With net metering, any extra power generated goes onto the grid and gets credited back to the farm.

Wednesday's friendly get-together at Verway Farms was a far cry from 2004, when dairies were first subjected to air district regulations for emissions of volatile organic compounds that contribute to smog.

There was fear about a potentially big negative impact on the dairy industry, which is far and away Kings County's most valuable agricultural product.

In the end, regulators gave dairies a smorgasbord of compliance options — some of which many were already doing.

But with federal clean air rules tightening, and with the air district still out of compliance with certain Environmental Protection Agency standards, officials said that a tougher road lies ahead.

"It is virtually impossible for the Valley to attain the new standards for ozone and particulates without these significant advancements in low-emission technologies," said Seyed Sadredin, the air district's executive director, in a written statement.