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The power of manure

New plant could be running by year end

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An Abbotsford farmer hopes to turn manure into power by the end of this year. If his plan is successful, valley farmers may follow.

Chris Bush plans to build a plant on his Abbotsford farm to convert dairy, hog and poultry waste into energy.

"We have been quietly working away, identifying the best building blocks and the best people to move forward with," he said.

He's waiting for B.C. Ministry of Agriculture support and the Agriculture Land Commission's approval to use farmland for the plant.

"Our vision is for the farms of the future and the idea is to make Abbotsford the hub for this type of technology," he said, adding he expects some formalized structure on what can be done by the spring of this year.

He plans on using a process called anaerobic digestion, a natural process that converts organic waste into biogas. Biogas is a clean energy source that can be converted to electricity, heat or biofuel for automotive applications.

The plant would take up one acre on his 24-acre farm.

"We don't want to go too big, yet we can't go too small. We have to do this right."

Poultry and hog farmer Rick Thiessen supports the idea and said if Bush's plant is successful he may follow suite.

"In the long term, if these systems can work it would be beneficial to the entire livestock sector," he said. "The question remains . . . whether or not these things will work as well on the field as they do on paper. But I am definitely interested in getting involved."

A feasibility study for anaerobic digesters for the Fraser Valley said the area generates around 3.3 million tonnes of organic waste per year, suitable for anaerobic digestion. Agriculture Minister Pat Bell said he hopes to see one of the plants running by the year's end.

"We expect to see these move forward very quickly. We are also hoping to see a series of them move forward in the coming years," he said.

Bell said a similar facility in Lynden, Wash, pipes manure from farms as far as two miles away and produces 400 kilowatts of power - enough to power 400 homes.

"We think it is a viable opportunity that will add cash in a lot of farmers' pockets."

Dairy producers are also interested. Paris Thomas, director of communications and planning for the B.C. Milk Producers Association, said it would be better to look at manure as a resource, not as waste.

"We are at a tipping point and we are shifting the way we think. Farms nowadays are no longer necessarily what we use to know," he said.

The BCMPPA has been looking at using alternative energy into farming practices, he said.

"We do not want to claim waste from the dairy industry can solve the energy problems in B.C., but we have to start somewhere and there are definitely farmers interested."

Jayna Houston, co-ordinator for the Abbotsford Soil Conservation Association, said there were benefits to anaerobic digesters, but they had their drawbacks.

"It works well at making manure environmentally friendly, but it does not decrease the volume of manure and the manure volume is our issue in the valley."

Gustav Rogstrand, waste management engineer for the agriculture ministry, said the concept is popular in Europe, especially Germany, where there are at least 4,000 farms using digesters. In the United States, there are about 100 plants and 10 in Canada, but none in B.C.

"The idea has been in B.C. since the late 70s, but it has been dormant up until three years ago," said Rogstrand. He thinks the positives far outweigh the negatives.

"The net gain would be positive in general waste management efficiencies, environmentally, job wise and farm income wise."

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