

http://www.sonomawest.com/sonoma_west_times_and_news/news/bodega-dairy-dives-into-digesters/article_a21e64c0-76e2-11e7-a276-078231259b0f.html

FEATURED

Bodega dairy dives into digesters

By Amie Windsor, Staff Writer, amie@sonomawest.com Aug 1, 2017 Updated 3 hrs ago



HAPPY COWS — Hughes Dairy keeps about 190 Jersey cows among 182 acres of farmland. The dairy engages in alternative manure management programs in effort to reduce greenhouse gases.

Photo Amie Windsor

Manure put to work in effort to reduce greenhouse gas

Kicking off a program beginning in August, the California Climate and Agricultural Network (CalCAN), hosted a tour of west county dairy farms on Wednesday, providing legislators a peek into manure and soil management best practices.

Representatives from state offices, including aides from area elected officials and local sustainability-related organizations, donned mud boots — or wrapped plastic around their office shoes — to traverse through cow pies and dust to learn about manure practices at the Hughes Dairy.

“This is a great opportunity for the state to see what’s being done at the local farm,” said Renata Brillinger, executive director with CalCAN.

Brillinger heads CalCAN, the coalition of organizations within agriculture, environment and food safety, dedicated to advancing policy solutions “at the nexus of climate change and sustainable agriculture,” its website reads. Brillinger said Sonoma County is a hotbed for organizations that practice the ways CalCAN preaches.

Many local organizations dedicated to land sustainability, including the Gold Ridge Resource Conservation District and the Sonoma Resource Conservation District (SRCD) work to help farmers and dairies become more energy and land efficient.

“We address natural resources and empower farmers to be part of the solution,” said Valerie Minton, executive director of SRCD.

Likewise, Gold Ridge works with farms to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provide options to help agriculture endeavors to remain water resilient, according to Brittany Jensen, executive director with Gold Ridge.

“There are so many farms doing good things here,” Brillinger said.

One of those farms, according to CalCAN, is Hughes Dairy. Located off of Highway 12 just east of Bodega, Richard and Marilyn Hughes’ farm is more than just a spot for happy cows. Their 182-acre organic dairy consists of about 190 Jersey cows. The high in protein and butterfat milk is supplied to Petaluma’s Straus Creamery.

“I came here 41 years ago with a hope and prayer,” said Richard Hughes.

He is a first generation farmer who has evolved his practices in effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

“We were very commercial at first,” Hughes said. “Then we’ve changed over the years. Being organic is just a part of it.”

Hughes operates his dairy farm with an understanding of the cyclical nature and relationship between the soil, his cows and the milk they produce.

“I have to give the cows the best feed,” Hughes said. “And I have only so many acres. I have to feed that soil for the plants I grow for the cows to eat.”

Hughes relies on alternative manure management practices, mixing cow and chicken manure he buys, to create a loamy, nutrient-rich soil.

The effort shows: The nearly 200 acres of rolling west county hills are green and lush with myriad types of grasses for the Jersey cows to consume.

The practice aligns with CalCAN’s alternative manure management practices, which is aimed at reducing emissions from dairy operations. Methane comprises 6 percent of the total greenhouse gas emissions in the state, with agriculture claiming responsibility for about 60 percent of that emission.

“The state’s dairies are the primary source of those emissions,” the CalCAN website reads.

Under the new alternative manure management program, the state will now incentivize dairies to engage in such practices through first-time grants, which are now available to farmers and ranchers. The funding for the program, approximately \$50 million, was allocated by the state in August 2016.