



Texas Association of Dairymen

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Contact: Kirsten Voinis, (512) 922-7141

AS HAUL OUT PROGRAM FADES AWAY, WHAT'S NEXT?

By John Cowan

They say that all good things must come to an end. But sometimes that end can be the beginning of something even better.

September 2005 was supposed to mark the end of government support of the Dairy Manure Export Support Project, less formally known as the manure haul out program. Started in 2000, the Central Texas program's goal was to transport a significant amount of manure out of the Bosque River and Leon River watersheds and deliver it to six nearby composting facilities, where it would be processed and sold as a soil amendment or for erosion control.

The program has been more successful than even the most optimistic envisioned. Building on this success, continued funding at lower rates per ton of manure hauled out has been extended for an additional year, to permit it to gradually phase out, thanks to additional state money obtained by State Sen. Kip Averitt (R-Waco) and a federal Clean Water Act grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

By the end of 2005, the program is predicted to have offset the transportation costs associated with the removal of close to 1 million tons of raw manure from the two watersheds. This roughly correlates to more than 2 million pounds of total phosphorus.

Although the government-provided financial support is dwindling, this does not mean that the program has to die. It was intended from the beginning to be a mechanism for establishing a sustainable composting market in the area. Hopefully it can continue on its own.

If the haul out program does end, or is scaled back, we shouldn't necessarily mourn. After all, the diversion of 2 million pounds of total phosphorous from the watershed is a positive result of the commitment dairy producers have made in these watersheds. –

I also see the program as one whose success has spawned a legacy. It was one of the first innovative programs that showed environmental progress could be made without harming the Texas dairy business, an integral part of the state's economy and a major contributor to the state's food supply.

The program has inspired more "out of the box" thinking and exploration of other technologies and methods that allow the dairy industry to conduct business with less of an impact on the environment.

The dairy industry is in full support. After all, the environment is important to everyone, not just those downstream from the dairies. Dairy farmers want to be good stewards of the environment – they and their families drink the water, breathe the air and live on the land.

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Now other such progressive programs are underway or on the drawing board. For example, in June the state's first anaerobic digester, designed to convert dairy waste into both electricity and compost, began operating on a farm near Hico. And researchers believe that new state energy legislation and rising oil prices will help push their studies into turning animal waste into energy to become reality.

It's going to continue to take both entities – private and government – to support and adopt new practices, programs and measures to protect and improve the environment.

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John Cowan is the executive director of the Texas Association of Dairymen Inc. (www.milk4texas.org).

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Contact information (for verification only):

John Cowan

3500 William D. Tate Ave., Suite 100

Grapevine, TX 76051

(817) 410-4576

jcowan@dfamilk.com

or

Kirsten Voinis

K. Voinis Communications

P.O. Box 12722

Austin, TX 78711

(512) 922-7141

kvoinis@kvoinis.com