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Michigan farm turns it into gas and electricity

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The Scenic View Dairy farm is turning cow manure into natural gas and electricity and is leading the charge toward expanding the alternative energy portfolio for the state.

Owing to a partnership with Canadian technology firm QuestAir Technologies Inc., the Fennville, Mich., operation is about to become the first commercial facility in the nation to convert animal waste into pipeline-grade methane. It will be used by Michigan Gas Utilities Corp.

Monroe-based Michigan Gas Utilities is a natural-gas utility that serves 162,000 customers in and around Grand Haven, Otsego, Monroe, Benton Harbor and Coldwater.

"Overall, this is a rather unexploited opportunity in North America," said Andrew Hall, director of corporate development for QuestAir Technologies of Vancouver.

The plant is expected to be fully operational by Feb. 15.

The Fennville farm has 2,000 milk cows that produce 25 million gallons of waste a year, which has a by-product of methane. To convert the solid waste into methane gas, farmers load the manure into a piece of equipment called an anaerobic digester that converts it into natural gas that can be put directly into a utility pipeline.

About 1.4 billion tons of cow manure are produced in the United States every year. And given that methane contributes to global warming, businesses like QuestAir and Scenic View say they are excited about the possibility of increasing the influence of renewable fuels to Michigan's overall energy mix.

The Fennville facility is one of only 100 plants in North America that process bovine manure. But all except the Scenic View operation are limited to converting animal waste into electricity.

"This is the first site ever to produce electricity and pipeline-grade natural gas," said Norma McDonald, operating manager for Phase 3 Developments & Investments LLC, which is a systems integrator and consultant for Scenic View for the project. "We'll produce about 700 kilowatt-hours of electricity and in addition to that about 100 cubic feet per minute of pipeline gas."