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Biogas growing in popularity across the United States

by Melissa Burden | The Flint Journal

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FLINT, Michigan -- Biogas may be new to some in Flint, but the decades-old process is actually already in use in other places across the country -- even in Michigan.

A plant in Texas claims it will create enough fuel to heat 12,000 homes in California and a farm in Michigan has contracts to sell its extra fuel to Michigan utilities.

"It used to be much more popular, much more common, but there's renewed interest because of the high energy cost," said Steven Safferman, associate professor of biosystems engineering at Michigan State University.

There are a handful of farms in Michigan, and by some estimates more than 100 farms nationwide, equipped to convert manure or agricultural waste into biogas.

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- **What:** Human waste will be converted into biogas, a methane gas that can be used for electricity and heat at the plant. A second phase aims to upgrade the biogas into biomethane, which could be used to fuel vehicles such as Mass Transportation Authority buses.
- **Where:** The production will be housed at the city of Flint's wastewater treatment facility in Flint Township. Swedish Biogas International offices will be housed at Kettering University in Flint.
- **When:** The facility is expected to be up and running in mid-2009.
- **Cost:** \$8 million to \$10 million over two phases.
- **Partners:** Swedish Biogas International, based in Linkoping, Sweden; the city of Flint; and Kettering University.

There are no estimates of how many other cities are using it, but it appears to be rare although interest is growing. The city of Grand Rapids is in the process of adding equipment to its wastewater treatment plant that would allow it to make biogas, said John Florshinger, a supervisor at Flint's wastewater treatment plant.

Some make biogas to get rid of their waste in an environmentally friendly way, while others use it to make power -- and even sell it to utility companies.

Scenic View Dairy's operation in Fennville takes cow manure from 2,000 cows and makes it into biogas. The project was completed in 2007 and the farm now has contracts to sell biomethane to Michigan gas utilities.

"The facility we designed and built in Michigan was actually the first in the U.S. to upgrade biogas for pipeline insertion," said Norma McDonald, an owner and operating manager for Phase 3 Renewables, a Cincinnati-based company.

McDonald's company also is seeing more business for individuals to sell the biomethane they create to utility companies .

"We also just signed an agreement with a major Midwest gas utility to develop 20 projects within the next three to five years," she said.

While wastewater treatment facilities may be using biogas to make their own energy, "there's nobody taking wastewater to biomethane that we can find," said Doug Parks, senior vice president

of new market development for the Michigan Economic Development Corporation.

The first phase of Flint's \$8 million to \$10 million project is to get biogas production up and running at the plant. A second phase would look to upgrade the biogas into biomethane to be used to fuel city vehicles or possibly Mass Transportation Authority buses.

"What can be done in Flint can be done in every American city," said Lennart Johansson, consul general of Sweden in Michigan.

Biogas production also is ramping up in other parts of the country including at a plant in Texas that claims to be the largest producer of biomethane that's converted to renewable natural gas in North America and possibly the world. (Another plant under construction in Iowa claims it'll be the biggest biomethane producing plant in the world when it's fully completed).

Both are private ventures.

The Huckabay Ridge plant near Stephenville, Texas, was completed late last year and began commercially selling its renewable natural gas in January, said Michael Hvisdos, executive vice president of Microgy Inc., a subsidiary of Environmental Power Corp.

In a year, the plant would produce enough renewable natural gas to heat 12,000 California homes, according to Microgy.

Microgy also has three facilities in Wisconsin that produce biomethane, which is used to produce electricity and that electricity is sold on the electrical grid and it has facilities under construction and planned for Texas and California.

"We see a tremendous amount of growth opportunity for us," Hvisdos said.

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