Profits from Manure Power? Economic Analysis of the Haubenschild Farms Anaerobic Digester

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THIS FACT SHEET ANALYZES THE ECONOMICS OF THE DIGESTER and related manure handling and electricity generation equipment installed at the 800-cow Haubenschild Family Farm near Princeton, Minnesota. The analysis assumes that it will be operated for ten years with no salvage value. The analysis considers the investment requirements for the digester, financing, labor requirements, repairs and maintenance for the equipment involved, electricity sales and avoided purchases, LP gas avoided purchases, and other benefits observed by the farm operator.

Investment Required and Financing Alternatives

The extra investment required for the Haubenschild digester in 1999 amounted to $355,000, or $444/cow for the 800-cow operation. In the five years since that time, the cost of building materials has increased by 19 percent according to USDA's index of prices paid by farmers. By those measures, the cost of a similar digester system would be $530/cow or $424,000 in 2005. Also, the Haubenschilds did some of the construction themselves, and the above costs do not include the cost of that labor. Other farms that hire all labor may experience higher costs. Costs of up to $1,000 per cow have been reported for digesters elsewhere. A sensitivity analysis shows how initial investment per cow would affect profitability.

The costs and risks involved in the Haubenschild digester have been offset to some degree by grants and in-kind assistance of $127,500 received from AgSTAR and the state of Minnesota. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture also provided a $150,000 six-year, zero-interest loan.

Now that the Haubenschild digester has shown that an anaerobic digester can operate successfully, other operations considering digester systems in the future will probably not receive as much financial assistance as this farm has received. There are, however, four financial incentives that likely will be available to operations who install digesters in the future:

- The Minnesota Department of Agriculture has funds available to make additional zero-interest loans to three more pilot farms, with the maximum amount increased to $250,000 per farm.
- The Minnesota Department of Commerce has a 1.5 cents/kilowatt-hour (kwh) operating subsidy available. It is paid over a period of ten years to producers who generate electricity from anaerobic digesters that started operations after July 1, 2001.
- Section 9006 of the 2002 Farm Bill is another USDA source of grant funding for farm digesters. A total of 68 grants were made in FY03 and FY04 for anaerobic digester projects, totaling $16.6 million. Grants availability under this program are for a maximum of 25 percent of the project cost, which would be $88,750 or $120/cow for a project similar to the Haubenschilds'. Funds are to be available through FY07 at $23 million/year. Additional grant funding may also be available from electrical utilities to help defray the cost of the electrical generation equipment.

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- A five-year federal renewable energy credit of 0.9 cents/kilowatt-hour is available for digesters placed in service in 2005.

Energy Production Performance and Operating Costs

The successful financial performance of Haubenschild Family farm's digester system has been attributed to several main factors: higher-than-expected methane gas production rates; little maintenance downtime on the engine-generator set; offset electricity costs the farm had been purchasing from the local utility; saved money by avoided purchases; and the sale of excess electricity back to the local utility at a retail rate.

Operation and maintenance costs (O&M, mainly repairs and labor) averaged around $15,000/year over the first five years of operation. An engine replacement and generator repair in the sixth year of operation in 2004 resulted in O&M costs of around $125,000. The repairs also reduced the electricity output this year.

O&M costs for the remaining four budgeted years are projected at $25,000 per year, under the assumption that repairs will be more costly than in the early years but nothing as costly as the engine will be required. Operation and maintenance costs averaged over ten years and adjusted for inflation to 2005 dollars are 3.1 cents/kwh on the case farm. That average O&M cost could be as much as 3.5 cents/kwh if additional major repairs are required or as little as 2.7 cents if repairs over the remaining years are minimal.

Valuing the Energy Benefits of the Anaerobic Digester System

Electricity prices offered by utilities to future farms will be lower than the retail rate offered by the utility for the first five years of operation of the Haubenschild digester. How will the subsidy situation and electricity prices affect the financial results of future digester installations?

The electricity generated is valued at 7.3 cents/kwh for the first five-and-one-half years of the Haubenschild digester's operation, and 3.56 cents for the remaining four-and-one-half years. Adjusted for inflation, this averages to six cents in 2005 dollar terms. The two "Future Farm" scenarios are based on a flat price of 3.56-cent/kwh for all ten years, which averages 3.1 cents when discounted to 2005 dollars. These prices are used to value both the sales and avoided purchases. However, these prices are used as a conservative estimate of purchase prices in the absence of a more detailed analysis of the peak/non-peak timing of purchases versus generation, and other considerations such as demand load charges.

Benefits Other Than Energy Production and Odor Reduction

The electricity production is well-documented but the farm operators feel that their operation is also benefiting in several other ways that are more difficult to document and value:

- sale of some digested manure because it smells less than raw manure.
- manure application timing is more flexible because part of the digestate is applied to alfalfa stubble with minimal risk of burning the plants.

Other benefits not valued at this point are odor control and possible reductions in weed seeds. Corn herbicide costs might be lower as weed seeds are killed during digestion. Experiments have thus far shown that immersion of weed seeds in the digester does not have a statistically significant impact on germination rates of most weed species. Further research is needed on the effect of digestion on weed seeds.

Cost-Effectiveness of a Digester Investment

The first bar on the graph shows the results for this farm to date, with projections to the end of the ten-year planning horizon, in 2008. The second bar, "Future Farms with Grants" scenario assumes that these financial incentives are the USDA Section 9006 grant and utility grants and assumed to total $200,000. On a per-cow basis, this would be about $250/cow compared to the $175/cow received by the Haubenschild Family farm. The $200,000 in grant funding assumed here for future farms with subsidies may be an optimistic estimate of the grant funding currently available.

The remainder of the investment would need to be provided by debt obtained from commercial lenders at market interest rates, or from the farm's equity capital. The financial analysis below assumes that 22 percent of the investment is paid from the farm's equity capital. The remainder is financed from debt. An opportunity cost of 11 percent/year is charged on equity capital and a seven percent interest rate is charged on debt borrowed from commercial lenders. This scenario also includes Minnesota's 1.5-cent/kwh production subsidy for all ten years and the new 0.9-cent federal renewable energy tax credit for the first five years.

The grants currently avilable through USDA and utiltities are perhaps the least certain of the financial assistance available and may require an arduous application process that some producers may be unable or unwilling to go through.

The third bar, "Future Farms with Loans and Production Subsidies" scenario omits the $200,000 in grants and increases the MDA zero-interest loan to its maximum of $250,000. The state production subsidy and the

federal tax credit are also included. The fourth bar, "Future Farms, No Incentives" scenario shows the situation if incentives were available.

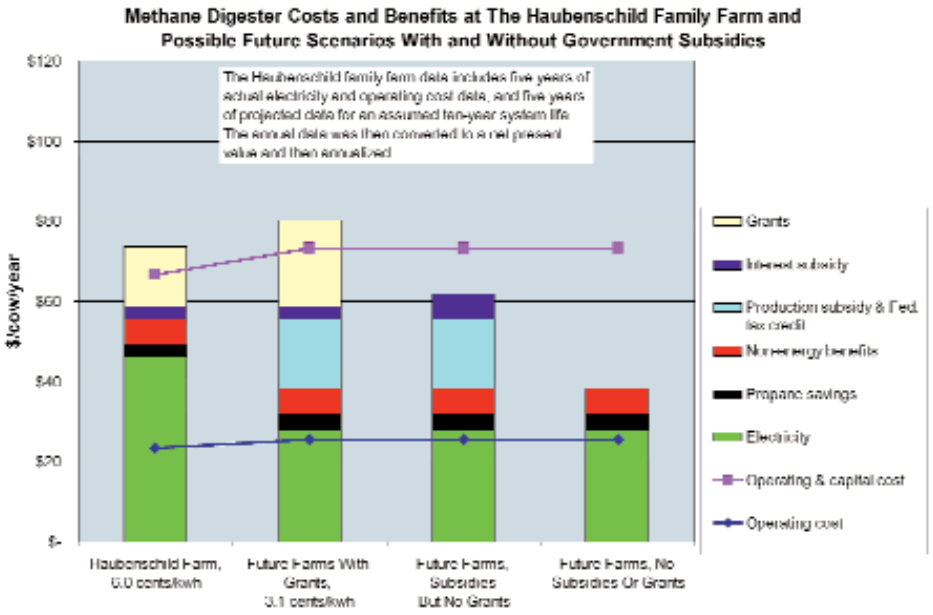
The two lines on the graph show the operating cost and maintenance per cow and the total with capital costs for the digester system. The bars show the value of the electricity produced, LP gas savings from heat recovery, non-energy benefits, and government subsidies and grants received. The breakeven electricity generation price after crediting the non-energy benefits and subsidies, is 5.6 cents/kwh.

The "Future Farm" breakeven electricity generation prices range would from 2.8 cents with the $200,000 in grants or 5.1 cents with only the loan, production subsidy and tax credit. Without the subsidies, 8 cents would be required for breakeven.

With the subsidies available to the next few pilot farms, a digester would be a breakeven proposition relative to total operating and capital costs. If digesters move beyond the subsidized pilot stage, a higher electricity price or substantial non-energy benefits would need to be sizable for the system to be cost-effective.

Impact on Whole-Farm Financial Performance

The anaerobic digester is one of several enterprises of a dairy farm operation. It is a relatively small enterprise. The Haubenschild Family farm was modeled with and without investment in the methane digester. Net electricity sales and avoided purchases each accounted for only 1% of gross revenue on the Haubenschild Family farm, making whole farm impacts of the digester small. The addition of the $355,000 digester does not significantly impact whole farm performance, given the level of excess electricity sales. The farm is neither better nor worse off having invested in the methane digester, given the level of electricity production on the Haubenschild Family farm.



Conclusions

- The performance of the Haubenschild Family farm's anaerobic digester system to date looks profitable to date, attributed to two primary factors:
  - careful management by a motivated and detail-oriented manager who has achieved outstanding digester and generator performance, and
  - favorable electricity pricing by the local utility along with assistance from various government agencies due to the Haubenschild status of the system.
- While future installations will not be eligible for the grants and zero-interest loan the Haubenschild Family farm received and will likely not receive as high an electricity price, a new state production subsidy and federal renewable energy credit appear to offer enough support to cover costs if performance is comparable to that of the Haubenschild Family farm.
- An electricity price of 8 to 10 cents/kilowatt-hour would probably be required to make a digester like this one a profitable investment, unless subsidized or unless the digester reduces odors or provides other benefits to the farm.

Table 1. **Comparative Analysis of Energy and Other Benefits of Digester System Scenarios with Varying Electricity Prices and State and Utility Incentives**[a]

	Haubenschild Family Farm	Future Farms with Grants, Loans and Subsidies	Future Farms with Loans and Production Subsidies	Future Farms, No Subsidies or Grants
Investment per Cow	$444	$530	$530	$530
Grants as % of Investment	36%	47%	0%	0%
Debt as % of Investment	42%	31%	78%	78%
MDA zero-interest loan	$150,000	$131,400	$250,000	$ --
MN production subsidy	$ --	$ 0.015	$0.015	$ --
Federal Energy Taxt Credit (first 5 years)	$ --	$0.009	$0.009	$ --
Breakeven electricity generation price (in 2005 dollars), $/kwh	$0.056	$0.028	$0.051	$0.080
Average electricity price received (in current dollars), $/kwh	$ 0.056	$ 0.036	$ 0.036	$ 0.036
Average electricity price received (in 2005 dollars), $/kwh	$0.060	$0.031	$0.031	$0.031
Simple Payback Period, Years	4	6	10+	10+
Internal Rate of Return on Assets	8%	8%	-4%	-13%
Internal Rate of Return on Equity	21%	20%	<-12%	<-12%
Net Present Value of Return on Equity Annualized	$5,919	$5,035	$(9,947)	$(27,856)
Change in milk production cost	-0.4%	-0.3%	-0.7%	1.8%

[a] A 10-year planning horizon is assumed, starting on July 1, 1999 for the Haubenschild farm and January 1, 2005 for the other scenarios. The per-cow numbers are based on the current herd size of 800 cows feeding the digester. The herd size was smaller during the first two years of operation, so the ten-year average herd size is 735 cows. Other benefits include digestate sales, avoided pit agitation, and more flexible timing of manure application, but not herbicide savings or any value on odor control or carbon credits. All four scenarios assume electricity generation of 1,253 kwh/cow/year and propane savings of 4.6 gallons/cow/year. Operations and maintenance costs with labor are estimated at $0.031/kwh for all four scenarios (discounted to year one, with the Haubenschild value adjusted for inflation to 2005 dollars.)

Table 2. **Sensitivity Analysis of Financial Performance as Investment Varies, for a Future Digester with Current Grants, Zero-Interest Loans and Production Subsidies, per Cow Basis**[a]

Investment	Annualized Capital Costs[b]	Operating Returns[c]	Annualized Net Present Value[d]	Rate of Return to Equity
$400	$(18)	$31	$13	43%
$500	$(23)	$31	$8	24%
$600	$(28)	$31	$3	13%
$700	$(33)	$31	$(2)	5%
$800	$(38)	$31	$(7)	0%
$900	$(43)	$31	$(12)	-4%
$1,000	$(48)	$31	$(17)	-7%

[a] The values in this table correspond to the second column of Table 1 and the second bar of the graph.
[b] "Annualized Capital Costs" corresponds to the total cost line of the graph minus the value of the grants and interest subsidy sections of the graph bars.
[c] "Operating Returns" represents to the benefits shown in the graph other than the grants and interest subsidy.
[d] "Annualized Net Present Value" is the difference between the returns and costs and corresponds to the second line from the bottom of Table 1, converted to a per-cow basis.