

FARMING INNOVATIONS FOCUS OF HALTON AGRICULTURAL FORUM

ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY CROPS, TURNING MANURE INTO ENERGY DISCUSSED AT EVENT

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Local farmers are changing the way they do things, to ensure the agricultural industry is sustainable for years to come.

Innovations in the field were the topic of the evening at the recent Halton Region Agricultural Forum held at Milton's Country Heritage Park.

The annual event drew a few dozen area residents and farmers, who heard from industry experts on agriculture research and technology that's helping reduce carbon emissions and protect the environment.

Korb Whale, who runs a seventh-generation dairy farm near Alma, is leading the pack in greenhouse gas reduction, with his anaerobic digester operation. The equipment takes manure and off-farm food waste, processes it through a shredder and then ferments it, creating methane to power a natural gas engine, which, in turn, powers a generator, producing elec-

tricity and heat.

The byproduct from the process can also be used as a fertilizer for the fields, he noted.

"Some people view manure as waste, but I've trained my children that when they smell manure, that's the smell of money," he said. "Not only is it great fertilizer, but now we can make electricity from it, too."

Whale's operation processes 9,000 tons of off-farm waste annually and produces six megawatts of electricity for the grid per day, along with half of the farm's power.

Jake Debruyne, a new-technology integration engineer at the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, said Halton's large land base lends itself to establishing anaerobic digester operations locally.

For example, he said food waste being shipped out of Toronto for processing could easily be brought to a larger-scale digester in Halton via Highway 401, with its proximity to the city making it an attractive option.



Torstar file photo

Innovations like using animal manure to generate electricity were among the topics of the evening at the Halton Agricultural Forum.

The digester could also be fuelled by biomass crops, which are grown specifically for use in energy production.

"There's a lot of land here that could be used for biomass crops," said Debruyne, pointing to agricultural land slated for development where building hasn't commenced yet, as an example.

Ontario Biomass Producers Co-operative president Jamie Fisher spoke

about the market for switchgrass as an environmentally friendly biomass crop.

The tall grass offers several important environmental benefits, he said. Its massive root system captures carbon in the ground, and its low pesticide and fertilizer requirements make it excellent for enhancing drinking-water quality.

Switchgrass also has high potential to offset

greenhouse gases when used as livestock bedding - its biggest commercial market - and then as a feedstock to produce biogas, he added.

"It has tremendous environmental benefits that are exciting because we need to be sustainable," he said. "That word 'sustainable' does matter."

On the topic of sustainability, Ontario Agri-Food Technologies president Tyler Whale highlighted the

use of genetics in agriculture. Case in point is the genetically modified Innate potato, which he said doesn't brown or oxidize, resulting in 400 million kilograms of potatoes being saved from waste in Canada every year.

"The specificity with which you can alter genetics now is incredible," he said. "Frankly, if you're not embracing genetics, you're not embracing a sustainable future."

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