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ENVIRONMENT

Critics fault climate-change legislation

June 22, 2009 | By Jennifer A. Dlouhy, Hearst Newspapers

Washington — At the Joseph Farms dairy in Atwater (Merced County), farmers aren't just transforming milk into cheese. They've also figured out how to turn manure into fuel - and a paycheck.

By storing waste from the dairy's 5,000 cows in a covered 7-acre lagoon and removing methane from it using sophisticated equipment, the farm is generating power that keeps refrigerators, lights and pumps running at its cheese plant.

The project keeps the heat-trapping greenhouse gas methane out of the atmosphere, thereby netting the farm another payback in the form of carbon credits traded on the 6-year-old Chicago Climate Exchange and the voluntary California Climate Action Registry, a nonprofit organization formed by the state.

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Across the nation, dairy operations such as Joseph Farms, as well as landowners growing trees on previously empty land and vegetable farmers who plant seeds over old crops without tilling their fields, could win big under climate-change legislation advancing on Capitol Hill.

The measure, which might be considered by the House this week, would force businesses to meet steadily tightening limits on carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions blamed for global warming. To meet the new caps, companies could cut their emissions or buy allowances from the federal government or other businesses to spew more of the pollutants.

But the legislation also would allow companies to "offset" as much as 2 billion tons of their emissions each year by investing in pollution-reducing projects.

Although Joseph Farms would not disclose confidential financial data, its manure-treatment system, installed four years ago at a cost of about \$3 million, has been found to sequester about 25 thousand metric tons of carbon dioxide or its equivalent each year.

With recent trading prices in single digits and estimates that the price could rise to \$10 if Congress mandates a carbon-trading scheme, the potential payback is significant.

Without that revenue, general manager Carl Morris said it would be a tough investment to sustain.

"It makes a big difference," he said. "These things are costly, and there are a lot of operational and logistical issues getting them up and approved and running and operating. The revenue stream from carbon

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