

Farm wins renewable energy grant

By **Bill Brown**
 Editor

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GANGES TWP-Life on livestock farms is not what it was back when grandpa was milking his cows by hand, or when feeding the pigs meant filling their trough by hand with food. Things have become just a bit more sophisticated.

That sophistication has reached a level where livestock manure is being refined to the point where it is providing energy-not only to provide power on the farm, but for re-sale back to the utility companies.

Right here in Allegan County, a farm in Ganges Township is already recycling cattle manure and re-processing it into alternative fuel. A second farm operated by the Mike Geerlings' family agricultural corporation located in Overisel Township will begin converting hog manure into methane gas next spring. Hillside Farms, 1519 62nd St. in Ganges Township, recently submitted a proposal in an agricultural competition sponsored by the State of Michigan Department of Agriculture for innovative programs.



The Michigan Department of Agriculture awarded a \$250,000 grant to Geerlings Hillside Farms, headquartered in Ganges Township on Thursday, Oct. 26, for work the Geerlings will be doing on their Overisel Township hog farm in installing an anaerobic digester that will help convert manure into renewable energy. From the left are, Brian Geerlings, Robert G. Craig, Director, Agriculture Development Division and Hillside Farms employee Mark Lucas, at the check presentation. (Photo by [Bill Brown](#))

According to Robert G. Craig of the department's Agriculture Development Division, the total amount of the 225 proposals submitted was \$36 million. The amount available to the state for this cycle was \$5 million. Only the most innovative programs were selected, and the Geerlings' Hillside Farms proposal for renewable energy at their Overisel site for \$250,000 was one of the winners.

These grant funds will fund Michigan's first centralized, farmer-owned anaerobic digester to produce renewable energy from hog manure.

This is a part of an aggressive effort to spur growth in several economic sectors and is a key component of the 21st Century Jobs Fund. This is a \$2 billion, 10-year initiative proposed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm, approved by the Michigan Legislature and administered by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation to accelerate the diversification of Michigan's economy.

Craig said the funding for the Julian-Stille Innovations in

Agriculture Program came from the state's share of the tobacco settlement.

"The rapid growth of Michigan's renewable energy industry is a shining example of how agriculture can strengthen and diversify our economy," said Mitch Irwin, MDA director. "These grants will be instrumental in supporting the expansion of this exciting sector,"

Accepting the mock check on behalf of the Geerlings family were Brian Geerlings and Mark Lucas.

Craig explained that under the state guidelines, the grant recipient is obligated to fund the construction of the project and then be reimbursed by the state with grant funds. Lucas said the project on the Ganges dairy farm was complete about three months ago. A separate building houses the equipment, which includes an anaerobic digester. He said the process involves heating the manure at 100 degrees for 25 days, a process that generates methane gas. Two dual fuel generators convert the gas to electricity. Lucas said the process in use at the dairy produces enough energy to provide the power for 900 homes.

Consumers Power is in the process of installing the equipment that will be needed to transfer the excess power from the farm to the power grid.

The project will be essentially the same at the Hillside's hog farm in Overisel Township, where the manure will come from 8,000 hogs. The energy there will be in the form of methane gas that will be transferred to a utility company pipeline.

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