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Report: Dairy Farms Dwindling as Gas Rises

CHRIS TORRES
Staff Writer

EPHRATA, Pa. — John Feusner considers himself lucky.

He's been making money collecting royalties from three separate gas wellheads on the 600-acre farm he owns just outside Troy.

It's just the beginning though. He expects to collect royalties from as many as 18 different wellheads in the future along with money from a large pipeline running through the farm.

"We're kind of right in the middle of the war zone," Feusner said laughingly.

The money has enabled him to pay off loans and debt, and get new equipment for his dairy farm. It's also put him in a better position to handle price drops in dairy from the roughly 200 head of cattle he milks.

All around him though, he's seeing dairy farmers, tired of the constant ups and downs of the business, deciding to take the money from their gas wells and call it quits.

He even thinks about doing the same thing sometimes.

"I have two kids that are interested. But I don't know if I want them to get in it," he said.

Feusner isn't alone. According to a recent Penn State study that analyzed three years of data from 2007 to 2010, milk production and the number of dairy cows have dwindled in counties within the Marcellus Shale region just as gas production has skyrocketed.

"Changes in dairy cow numbers seem to be associated with the level of drilling activity," the report states. "For instance, counties with 150 or more Marcellus Shale wells on average experienced a nearly 19 percent decrease in dairy cows, compared to only a 1.2 percent average decrease in counties with no Marcellus wells."

The report also found milk production following a similar trend.

"Production in counties with at least 150 Marcellus wells fell by an average of 18.5 percent. In contrast, milk production in counties with no Marcellus wells increased by about 1 percent."

Report co-author Tim Kelsey, professor of agricultural economics at Penn State, and several colleagues analyzed county-level National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) data on dairy cows and milk production in conjunction with data provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) on the number of gas wells drilled.

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Photo provided by Roy Maurer

Roy Maurer's Christmas tree farm in Dalmatia is one of dozens of farms that will be affected by the building of a power line.

Farmers in Showdown With Electric Company

CHRIS TORRES
Staff Writer

EPHRATA, Pa. — For Roy Maurer, it's not about the money, it's about making a point.

Maurer is one of several farmers in an area just north of Harrisburg who are fighting a proposal by PPL Electric Utilities to use eminent domain to complete a 69-kilovolt power line that would cut through dozens of farms in three separate counties.

The 11- to 12-mile line would connect two existing power lines on either side of the Susquehanna River. The company says the line is necessary to improve reliability and lessen power outages for

25,700 homes and businesses in Northumberland, Snyder and Juniata Counties.

PPL proposed the project back in 2009.

The company has been negotiating land easement agreements with 54 landowners in the area since 2010. The line would require a 100-foot right of way on each property, 50 feet on either side of the line. The company says it has come to an agreement with 47 of the 54 landowners.

Maurer, who lives in Dalmatia, Northumberland County, and several others are holding out, vowing to fight the project from going through their backyards.

The state's Public Utility Commission will now decide if PPL can move forward with eminent domain to get these remaining landowners to give in.

Jennifer Kocher, PUC spokeswoman, said this week that the process could take the entire summer since the administrative law judges hearing the case have been assigned until Aug. 6.

It could take several months after that for the commission to issue a final ruling.

"It's a long process, mainly because of due process. Everyone has a chance to have their say and present evidence," Kocher said.

She said the situation is unusual,

given that the project is considered small and doesn't need PUC approval, but the fact PPL wants to use eminent domain to acquire the rest of the acreage it needs requires the commission to step in.

Assuming PPL gets the commission's approval to proceed with eminent domain, the individual cases would then have to be settled in each county's Court of Common Pleas.

A PUC hearing March 7 in Dalmatia drew more than 120 people, both for and against the power line.

Another hearing is set for Tuesday, March 20, in Harrisburg.

Maurer attended the March 7 hearing.

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Searching for a Humane Way to Cull Poultry

CHARLENE M. SHUPP ESPENSHADE
Special Sections Editor

LANCASTER, Pa. — When it comes to handling poultry, producers have to find humane processes not only for caring for their flocks but also for putting their birds down.

Mike Hulet of Penn State's department of poultry science and Randall Bock of its department of ag and biological engineering talked about humane culling and depopulation for poultry welfare at the March Poultry Health Seminar at the Eden Resort in Lancaster.

They discussed their continuing research into what methods, current and new, best meet the evolving standards for humanely putting down poultry.

When they first started their research, Hulet said, it did not take long before they tripped into an unanticipated problem — their aesthetic, or whether they looked humane.

American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) standards were used in evaluating different practices.

Some of the standards were that the practice had to be irreversible, induce a loss of consciousness and death without pain, be reliable and safeguard the safety of personnel.

Hulet said if the practice did not have 100 percent effectiveness, they ruled it out.

Most of the research time was spent on the development of a nonpenetrating captive-bolt device that could be used for poultry.

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Photo by Charlene Shupp Espenshade
Randall Bock discusses how to use the TED and his research findings.

Professor Lays Out Pieces of Dairy Puzzle

LAURA ZOELLER
Southwestern Pa. Correspondent

YOUNGWOOD, Pa. — Working to increase reproductive success in milk cows is like putting together a big puzzle.

That sentiment was expressed by Ray Nebel last week at the Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Dairy Day at Westmoreland Community College in Youngwood.

Nebel, who works both as vice president of technical services programs for Select Sires Inc. in Ohio and as an adjunct professor at Ohio State University, laid out some of the puzzle pieces that can help improve reproductive efficiency.

"Reproduction officially starts during the transition period and is one of the most critical areas to watch," Nebel said. "It is important to get her off to a

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Photo by Charlene Shupp Espenshade

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Poultry

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Cargill had approached Penn State for further research on such a device.

Bock stressed that the system they looked at is nothing like the type found in cattle slaughter plants. The captive-bolt device they studied is much smaller.

A primitive version of a captive-bolt device is a hammer. Using the hammer as an example, Bock asked whether consumers would think that using a hammer looks humane.

The answer, he said, is probably not, which helps explain the drive by the industry to search for newer options.

As an example, Bock noted the recent decision by McDonald's restaurants to phase out the use of gestation crates by their pork suppliers.

It is these concerns that are driving changes in the animal agriculture industry, he said.

The nonpenetrating captive bolt device that Bock discussed is called TED and has several models designed for turkeys, broilers, layers and pigs.

The opportunities they see for this system, he said, is for on-farm culls, live-haul transport for general and emergency uses, large processors for receiving or small facilities for processing.

He demonstrated how the nonpenetrating captive bolt worked and the safety features to protect employees and ensure proper use on an animal.

Bock used a block of

wood to demonstrate the power of the bolt impact and its speed.

For his part, Hulet discussed the use of carbon dioxide in a contained area to put down the birds.

In his study, Hulet used a contained area with a cart to place birds at multiple levels, similar to what would be found in a commercial setting.

He said that the birds remained quiet through the process.

The gas is added in several phases, the first to put the birds to sleep, then a second higher level and finally a third level, which kills the birds.

If there is a downside, he said, there have been challenges with blood removal from the bird.

Hulet said he also looked at using fireman's foam, a method used for depopulating a diseased flock, reminding the audience that this is not an approved method for routine culling on farms.

He said the birds remained calm in the process, which came as a surprise, but it was not 100 percent effective in killing the birds on the cart.

The foam would leave air pockets, which allowed some birds to survive. The results took this option off the table.

Hulet also touched on the use of electrocution. When Great Britain had a large avian influenza outbreak, this was a method that was used there. It proved effective, but as Hulet said, there is a variation on the voltage and timing based on the size, type and sex of the birds.