



Universities Receive Funding for Renewable Energy Projects

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By Chris Torres Staff Writer

A swath of money is coming to two Pennsylvania universities to get farmers thinking about the way energy is used on the farm and more may be available to pay for improvements.

The USDA announced on Thursday last week that Penn State and St. Francis University, just east of Pittsburgh, will receive grants for energy audits and technical assistance on farms.

Penn State is receiving \$99,796 to help fund energy audits on farms, while St. Francis is receiving \$100,000 to provide technical assistance to farmers and rural small businesses to help reduce energy consumption.

West Virginia's Division of Energy also got grant funding — \$100,000 — to complete 130 energy audits around the state.

The funding comes from the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP), which was authorized under the 2008 Farm Bill.

In 2009, USDA signed an agreement with the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy to cut greenhouse gas emissions on dairies by 25 percent by the year 2020.

A total of 67 projects nationwide will collectively receive more than \$3 million in funding from the agency to address energy audits and various projects on farms.

Dallas Tonsager, undersecretary for rural development at USDA, said last Thursday by phone that the initiative primarily focuses on energy audits and feasibility studies. But he added that REAP can be used to fund projects on farms, such as methane digesters, wind mills and biofuel projects.

Individual projects can receive grants totaling 25 percent of a project's costs, while loans cover up to 75 percent of a project's cost.

It is a competitive program, Tonsager said, with projects that produce the most energy for the least cost getting the most funding.

Methane digesters, he said, are some of the most popular projects funded through REAP.

“In the Midwest, it is quite often energy-efficient grain dryers. I would say methane digesters and grain dryers are right at the top of the list of things we do,” he said. “We like energy efficiency of any kind. We’re plugging away at it.”

At St. Francis, the money will be used to fund seminars and expos highlighting various alternative energy uses on farms, including biomass, geothermal and solar.

The university received a \$100,000 REAP grant in 2010 to fund a wind resource software product, which allows farmers and rural small-business owners to see whether their property is in an area suitable for windmills.

Gwendolyn Anderson, director of the Renewable Energy Center at St. Francis University, said the overall goal is to see what technologies will work for different producers.

“One of the goals is to prevent investments in systems that don’t make sense,” Anderson said.