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Preserving California's Emissions Reduction Goals: Stay The Course On Methane Reductions From The LCFS

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SEPTEMBER 28, 2023 BY SAM WADE

As California continues efforts to reach its ambitious climate goals, the California Air Resources Board faces a pivotal decision that could profoundly impact the state's climate progress. CARB is currently updating the state's Low-Carbon Fuel Standard program, which has prompted overly simplistic demands from anti-dairy political advocacy groups to remove recognition for reducing methane emissions during fuel production from the program. Despite the noise, it is crucial for policymakers to stay the course and support effective methane reduction measures currently supported by the LCFS and validated by prevailing academic research.



Sam Wade, director of public policy at the Coalition for Renewable Natural Gas

Make no mistake: there is overwhelming research demonstrating that avoiding, capturing and utilizing manure methane at California dairy farms offers significant environmental benefits. That's why the US

Environmental Protection Agency has supported anaerobic digesters at dairies for almost 30 years.

Independent researchers at UC Davis have recently demonstrated that California dairy farmers are on their way to hit the state's long-term methane reduction goals due primarily to widespread adoption of digesters; outside of California, Cornell University, among many others, has highlighted the win-win-win climate, economic and community benefits offered by dairy digesters.

Ill-advised phaseout

While that research is encouraging for champions of climate-smart policies, it has not stopped a small but passionate band of anti-dairy interest groups from pushing CARB to end avoided methane crediting immediately in 2024. In response to this pressure, in an initial regulatory assessment released in early September, the Board began to consider such a phase out by 2040.

The reckless proposal put forward by anti-dairy voices would immediately strand multi-billion-dollar investments and waste millions in state funding committed for existing projects. Even the Board's more modest phase-out proposal would stop new investment and halt progress on methane reduction controls, which would make it impossible to reach our ambitious climate goals.

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Slowing down on methane reduction is directly counter to the Subnational Methane Action Initiative launched by Governor Newsom to encourage other countries to act on methane from all sources. If we in California can't stand by our working programs to cut methane, we shouldn't expect others to follow our example.

Proactive solution

Methane emissions from California dairies represent a substantial portion of the state's greenhouse gas output, making it imperative to address this source of methane proactively. Methane is a highly potent greenhouse gas with a global warming impact of more than 80 times that of carbon dioxide on a 20-year basis. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change continues to highlight the importance of prioritizing methane reductions stating that, "strong, rapid and sustained reductions in methane emissions can limit near-term warming and improve air quality by reducing global surface ozone."

Avoided methane crediting — an LCFS mechanism whereby credits are awarded to dairy farms that capture methane emissions their cows would otherwise produce and turn it into a useful fuel— has offered one proactive means by which California can dramatically curb emissions. Because of these credits, dairies can invest in methane reduction technologies, such as anaerobic digesters, and generate renewable natural gas (RNG), a clean alternative to fossil transportation fuels like diesel. Since this provision in the LCFS was implemented, California milk farms have reduced their emissions while transportation markets have gained access to cleaner fuels.

Misplaced pushback

While capturing a harmful pollutant and turning it into something useful may seem common sense enough, a recent series of meetings around a long-planned update to the LCFS has seen a few anti-dairy groups line up to protest avoided methane crediting, with a range of arguments as to why. From grants to installing digesters, to the LCFS, these hardline groups continue to reject a range of policies that can (and have) lowered emissions because they believe solutions that work within the current agricultural system are insufficient.

Nothing could be further from the truth. UC Davis' "Meeting the Call" report published late last year concludes that California's current, four-pronged approach involving cow herd efficiency, methane avoidance, methane capture and utilization (RNG), and enteric methane reduction have the state "well on the way" to cutting methane emissions in the dairy sector by 40% by 2030. This research, conducted at one of the world's foremost research institutes for agricultural science, showcases the potential for California to lead the way in sustainable dairy practices.

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Maintaining focus

Maintaining the strength of the LCFS is vital for two primary reasons:

- Sustainable Reductions: The LCFS program has already demonstrated its efficacy in driving significant emissions reductions, spurring innovation in clean fuel technologies, and encouraging investment in renewable energy projects.
- Holistic Impact on Local Communities: The LCFS program encourages RNG project development, which reduces methane emissions and offers benefits to local communities including improved air quality, reduced odors, and green job creation.

There is little doubt that environmental groups looking to tweak the LCFS have their hearts in the right place. Climate change is an urgent problem requiring urgent action, and community engagement is key toward securing equitable outcomes. But unraveling proven components of the State's climate strategy without viable alternatives will only foment higher emissions and more climate impacts on the very communities that California policymakers seek to protect.

As it is, California is already struggling to come out of the starting blocks on other initiatives to cut methane emissions, with policy watchdogs from the Little Hoover Commission recently calling for "significant adjustments" to the portion of the landmark 2016 Senate Bill 1383 law requiring organic waste diversion from state landfills. Can we really allow setbacks on the dairy methane reduction portion of SB 1383, as well?

It is crucial for CARB to resist calls to end avoided methane crediting for dairies and instead prioritize bolstering the LCFS program by focusing on other areas of improvement, such as maximizing overall program ambition. Doing so will ensure that emissions mitigation measures remain robust and effective, providing the dairy industry with the necessary incentives to make clean fuel and actively participate in achieving California's climate goals. Only then can other jurisdictions look to California as a successful example, instead of a cautionary tale.

Sam Wade is director of public policy at the Coalition for Renewable Natural Gas.

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