

## **Dairy plan in final phase**

**Northern Plains Dairy would milk 3,000 cows southwest of St. Peter**

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**June 27 2001**

ST. PETER - The years-long effort to build the state's largest dairy may be heading into its final phases as an environmental study on the project has been released by the state.

Northern Plains Dairy, backed by the Davis family, which operates Davisco Foods, would milk 3,000 cows at 4 1/2 miles southwest of St. Peter in Oshawa Township.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is seeking public comment on the Environmental Assessment Worksheet for the dairy. (See related story.)

The project has gone through a number of revisions in recent years. The site is further from St. Peter than two previous proposed sites, which drew opposition from Gustavus Adolphus College and from some who believed the sites were too close to Seven Mile Creek. The project is also 500 cows larger than previous proposals. And the plan includes a high-tech process that would take odor and methane gas from manure, with the gas being burned to produce electricity.

After the 45-day public comment period, the MPCA will decide whether the project warrants a much more in-depth environmental review called an Environmental Impact Statement. An EIS will be done if requested in writing and if a member of the MPCA Citizens' Board or the MPCA commissioner agrees one should be done. The more extensive review has never been done for a feedlot in Minnesota and many believe ordering the costly and time-consuming review would effectively kill any feedlot project.

If Northern Plains gets approval, construction would take up to one year.

The plan includes an anaerobic digester system to treat the manure. The digesters are covered concrete tanks that are heated. Bacteria breaks down the manure, consuming volatile solids, which include odor-causing compounds. The process creates methane gas, which would be captured and burned to run two electric generators.

After going through the digesters, liquids from the manure would be stored in a nine-acre, 39 million-gallon clay-lined earthen basin. The liquid would be applied to area farm fields once a year.

Because the liquid has gone through the digesters, the liquid stored in the earthen basin is not anticipated to cause odors under normal operating conditions, according to the EAW.

Solids from the digesters would be composted with some applied to farm fields as fertilizer and some stored and used as bedding in the dairy barns.??? The dairy would be on a 148-acre site owned by Northern Plains. Northern Plains would also have contracts with area farmers for 3,702 acres of land to be used to apply manure. The dairy estimates it would need about 2,000 acres of land for manure application.

Several large barns and other buildings on the site would total 16 acres (or more than four city blocks) of roofed area.

Last year, Gustavus Adolphus College filed a lawsuit to block the original proposal and site for Northern Plains Dairy, citing a number of environmental and odor concerns. The college, Northern Plains and the MPCA reached an out-of-court settlement in August in which the dairy agreed to find a new site farther from St. Peter and to address other concerns, including considering an anaerobic digester system. In exchange, the college dropped its suit.

Axel Steuer, president of Gustavus, said Tuesday that he had just received a copy of the EAW on the new proposal.

"Now, it's in the hands of the people and the college and city of St. Peter and anyone else who wants to make comments on it. We look forward to having a chance to read in detail what is being planned and be part of any group or individual that will make comments that the MPCA can consider," Steuer said.