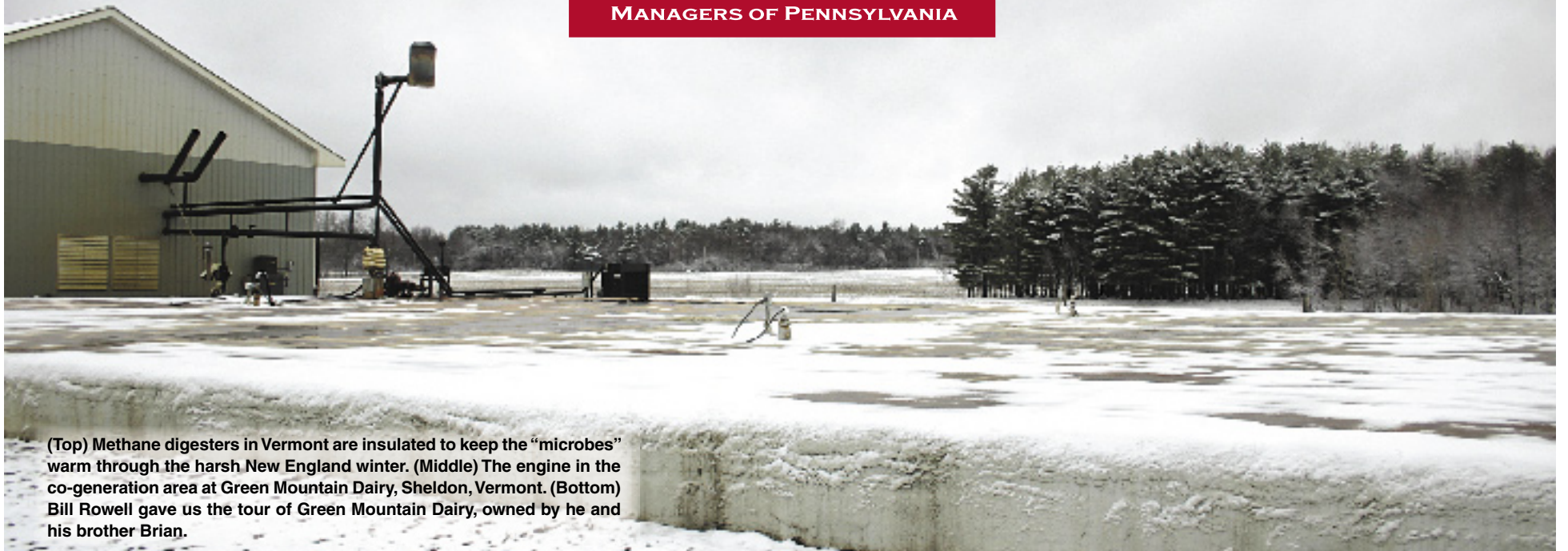


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(Top) Methane digesters in Vermont are insulated to keep the “microbes” warm through the harsh New England winter. (Middle) The engine in the co-generation area at Green Mountain Dairy, Sheldon, Vermont. (Bottom) Bill Rowell gave us the tour of Green Mountain Dairy, owned by he and his brother Brian.

Milk, methane, maple syrup

Tour reveals Vermont’s sense of community

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

BURLINGTON, Vt.—A “sugar snow” greeted tour-goers on their first day in Vermont last month, and it was fitting that our stop over lunch would be to Branon’s West View Maples. The attraction there was the equipment. A former milk tanker received the liquid from the taps, traveling miles to the “sugar house.” A different sort of pipeline, you might say.

And then there was the reverse osmosis. Watching the heating and filtering to produce pale yellow to rich gold shades of syrup. The discussions about quality, pricing, distribution, marketing, finding new uses for a traditional food commodity. It was all so familiar.

There were many parallels between the thriving maple “sugaring” business to be applied to the dairy business in search of its future as 38 producers from Pennsylvania and New York spent a little time recharging with a different perspective on the first day of the PDMP tour in Vermont on March 24.

Throughout the three days, we learned a real sense for the New England perspective, and a new word: “wicked.” Milk was “wicked good.” Cheese was “wicked sharp,” and living 10 or so miles from the Canadian border, one host declared the difference between the economic situation at his farm versus dairy farms a few miles north was “wicked frustrating.”

An independent and entrepreneurial spirit in the north country is tempered by a keen sense of community. Vermont has seen more consolidation, it seems, than Pennsylvania. They produced 2% of the nation’s milk in 1948 and they produce 2% still today, but at the beginning of 2009, there were only 1,141 dairy farms left in the Green Mountain state and the average herd size is double that of Pennsylvania at about 125 cows per farm.

As the size of dairy farms have grown larger, producers are having to look for ways to manage the manure, by changing it from a problem to an asset. This, and a consumer population that tends to think a bit more “green” than some other parts of the country, are the combination that has led to “Cow Power” signs on so many barn doors. Vermont surpasses other states in the operation of methane digesters.

We visited some of the largest dairy farms in the state, and three of the four Vermont dairy farms visited operate a methane digester: Pleasant Valley Farm, owned by Mark and Amanda St. Pierre, put up the second digester in the state; Green Mountain Dairy, owned by Bill and Brian Rowell has had their digester since 2008; and Maxwell’s Neighborhood Farm, owned by Maurice and Lois Maxwell and their sons and grandson, also put their di-

gester in within the past year and a half.

They all raved about the separated manure solids as bedding, used fresh from the digester.

On the energy side, there were startups between 1972 and 2005 that didn’t operate very long. But the next generation of digester and co-generation technology is engineered to be more efficient today.

The real key to the success has been the motivation of utility companies to use the power generated from methane digesters.

They are motivated because each kilowatt hour generated by methane gas qualifies for a higher price because consumers actually choose to pay 4-cents more per kilowatt hour just because they want to participate in renewable energy.

So, in the last two years, large dairy farms have been flocking to install digesters to capture the now more profitable electricity and



to deal with the ever growing environmental, social and regulatory challenges confronting larger dairy farms.

But make no mistake about it: Large farm, small farm, it doesn’t matter. Family farms rule in Vermont and the state has an active policy of wanting to maintain its family farms. People picture the 60 to 80 cow small family farm in the hills and river valleys of Vermont. Even though the reality is farms are fewer and larger today, the tourism industry is big, and it relies on dairy farms.

Without open fields, barns and cattle, there would be no tourists, explained our hosts. The landscape is a “working” landscape, and dairy

is an essential part of the fabric.

Of the three farms with digesters, the first stop was Green Mountain Dairy, where the Rowell family has 950 milking cows and farms 1000 acres of corn and 500 acres of alfalfa hay. They ship 23 million pounds of milk annually through St. Albans Cooperative, with much of it going to Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and the balance to cheese makers and the Boston, Mass. fluid market. Dry cows and 650 heifers are cared for on site.

Green Mountain was recognized as Vermont’s Dairy Farm of the Year last year, and ever since the methane digester was installed in 2008, Bill Rowell says he “can’t believe the

people that come to see us.”

Green Mountain Dairy has hosted more than 11,000 people from 23 countries at the farm in the past two years.

Rowell showed us around, and he took some time to share his thoughts on the state of the dairy industry today.

“I addressed the Georgia milk producers where Class I utilization is 66% and there are only 250 dairy farms left. They have zero tolerance for losing one more farm...” said Rowell, who is involved with Vermont-based Dairy Farmers Working Together. “They have a real concern about the transportation credits with Texas and New Mexico milk coming at them.”

“Doug Maddox went to Southeast Milk Cooperative in Florida to talk about doing something with a management tool so we can have a living and smile once in a while,” he added.

“Down there, they are even less tolerant than in Georgia... We have got to get it through their heads that we’re not being paid fair. No one has come up with a perfect plan, but the important thing is to have a seat at the table and have a voice and engage the process.”

Rowell spoke with conviction, urging dairy-men to “Think of the political power we could have if we speak the same language, with a unified voice like the processors do and the co-ops do,” he said. “Let’s not be gone.”

Local food, local energy and local farms were a repeated theme here in Vermont, and with that, came a sense of why Dairy Farmers Working Together has pushed the national conversation on growth management.