

Prepared Testimony of  
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Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission  
*before the*  
House Energy and Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees  
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Good afternoon, Madam Chair Fiedler, Chairman Pashinski, Chairman Causer, Chairman Moul, and honorable members of the House Energy and Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees. My name is Katie Zerkus, and I am a Commissioner with the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (PA PUC).

I appreciate the opportunity to testify in front of your esteemed committees today on anaerobic digestion, sustainable agriculture, and the roles of each in Pennsylvania's energy landscape. Please note that the thoughts included in this testimony are my own and may not necessarily reflect those of the entire PA PUC.

As a Commissioner with the PA PUC, I am a member of NARUC – the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners – and serve on the Energy and Environmental Resources Committee, the Gas Committee, Subcommittee on Pipeline Safety, and serve as a co-vice chair of the NARUC-Department of Energy Task Force on Natural Gas Infrastructure Planning. Additionally, I have been appointed to the Farm, Ranch, and Rural Communities advisory board with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). I would be remiss if I did not mention that in 2017, I worked as the legislative director for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. I mention all these roles for a specific reason – to highlight my engagement on these critical issues, and to emphasize that these topics are central to national discussions across regulatory and policy circles.

I appreciate the willingness of the committee to further explore the issue of anaerobic digestion and its product, biogas. Biogas is not necessarily new technology, and it is no longer considered “niche” as waste-to-energy projects are gaining traction as an important component of “yes/and” energy strategies.

As background, anaerobic digestion is the process by which microorganisms break down organic materials (i.e., made of plants or animals) in the absence of oxygen. The process can happen naturally in spaces like wetlands or landfills, as well as in enclosed and controlled environments like anaerobic digesters, as seen today on the committee's tour of Mr. Brett Reinford's farm.

Anaerobic digestion is essentially recycling organic material (i.e., animal manure, food residuals, spent grain) that would otherwise be landfilled, incinerated, or become run-off into a local waterway, which may create environmental, aesthetic, and/or regulatory challenges. Co-digestion is the simultaneous anaerobic digestion of multiple organic materials in one digester (i.e., residual food waste and manure).

The biogas (i.e., methane) produced within an anaerobic digester can be collected and used for fuel and/or to generate electricity and can be further refined or treated to become Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF), or Renewable Natural Gas (RNG), which is compatible with natural gas pipelines for residential or business use.

The benefits of anaerobic digestion are many – economic, energy production, job creation, emissions reduction, odor reduction, and agricultural (i.e., improved nutrient management or additional revenue).

I always say that there is a beautiful nexus between our agricultural and energy systems here in Pennsylvania, and we have a great story to tell.

As examples, Pennsylvania:

- is a top three energy producing state, along with Texas and Florida,
- is a net exporter of power, exporting over 80 million MWh annually for the last four years,
- is the second largest natural gas producer, only behind Texas,
- is one of 14 states that produces over 1 GW annually each year from solar facilities,
- boasts over 52,000 farms (swine, poultry, beef, dairy),
- leads the nation in the production and export of hardwood lumber,
- is the home to some of the top breweries in the country, which includes but is not limited to Yuengling, Troegs and Victory,
- has many active landfills, and
- ranks highly in the snack food and confectionary sectors by housing major brands like Martin's Potato Chips, Hershey, and Snyder's of Hanover.

Pennsylvania is the “Keystone State” for a reason. We enjoy plentiful natural resources, are strategically located, geographically, and have a rich history in agriculture and energy production which can provide nutrient-rich feedstock as illustrated above. The Commonwealth is well positioned to play a pivotal role in shaping a sustainable and resilient future by converting waste into power.

There is a lot of good work being done across the Commonwealth. To be succinct, I will illustrate a few projects of which I have first-hand knowledge:

- Dickinson College is a prime example of how small-scale agriculture can harness biogas for energy. On its 90-acre organic farm, Dickinson processes manure from a neighboring dairy, food residuals from the college dining hall and the Carlisle Area School District, as well as spent grain supplied by Molly Pitcher Brewery. This combination produces biogas, which in turn is used to generate about 200,000-300,000 kWh of electricity to power the farm, fuel farm vehicles, and also provides an opportunity for the farm to sell power back onto the grid. In addition to Mr. Brett Reinford's farm, this system can serve as a model for other farms in the region with an interest in biogas digestion.
- In Derry Township, the Municipal Authority has adopted a similar approach at its Clearwater Road Wastewater Treatment Facility (WWTF) in Hershey. The facility has invested in gasification technology, enabling it to heat municipal buildings and sell electricity to the grid. Additionally, the site has expanded to accept food residuals from breweries and fast-food establishments, as well as sewage from the south-central region. The electricity generated is used to power municipal operations, at net zero, and offer savings for their consumers.
- WM (formerly Waste Management) operates landfills that harness methane to fuel their own trucks, power the grid, and produce RNG. WM recently cut the ribbon at their Fairless Hills landfill to announce an RNG facility. The \$131 million dollar investment will process biogas collected from the landfill into pipeline-quality gas for injection into the nearby commercial gas distribution network. The facility is expected to recover and distribute roughly 3 million MMBtus per year of RNG. The recovered gas would serve the equivalent of 65,000 households or would fuel the

equivalent of approximately 2,750 heavy duty waste and recycling vehicles. Through the beneficial use and recovery of the landfill-derived biogas, more than 170,000 tons per year of emissions would be avoided or reduced.

Pennsylvania has so much untapped potential.

According to the American Biogas Council, Pennsylvania ranks third out of all 50 states for biogas production potential, with agriculture and wastewater as leading biogas capture systems. Up to 135 billion ft<sup>3</sup> of methane could be produced each year, which is the equivalent of 17.7 billion kWh or the annual electricity usage of 1,642,202 households. The American Biogas Council also cites the potential buildout to reduce the emissions equivalent of taking more than 172,000 cars off the road, to unleash more than \$19 billion in capital investment, to create more than 35,000 construction jobs and estimates more than 2,000 long-term jobs, in addition to the ability to recycle almost 2 million tons/year of dairy manure.<sup>1</sup>

Other states are tapping into their biogas production potential for various purposes, and reaping the benefits, such as:

- In New Jersey, the Linden Renewable Energy Project, with energy holding company South Jersey Industries, will divert about 1,500 tons per day of food residuals from regional landfills (some close to capacity) and capture methane inside large anaerobic digesters to create an estimated 3,783 million BTUs per day of pipeline-quality RNG that will be used by a subsidiary, Elizabethtown Gas, which serves 300,000 industrial, commercial, and residential customers in several New Jersey counties. It is estimated that the plant will avoid the equivalent of about 12,000 metric tons of emissions annually.<sup>2</sup>
- In Minnesota, CenterPoint Energy, a leading utility in the state, has entered into an agreement to source organic food residuals and yard waste in the Twin Cities, along with waste from farms and wastewater treatment plants. This initiative will generate enough energy to power approximately 2,500 Minnesota homes.<sup>3</sup>

Energy demand is projected to grow at record levels in the coming years, particularly as states like Pennsylvania seek to expand their investment in artificial intelligence (i.e., data centers). Reliability and resiliency will be key as we decide how we are going to meet these challenges. With biogas systems being a dispatchable 24/7 power source, the Commonwealth has an opportunity to include strategic investments in an expansion of biogas systems to help with resource adequacy. It is critical that states secure every possible electron and molecule it can to power our needs.

Our energy future is not about picking winners and losers; it is about building a resilient portfolio in the most sustainable way possible. It is about embracing a “yes/and” philosophy instead of “either/or.” Silos are meant to be on farms, not in conversations about our energy future - let us not overlook the agricultural community as a strategic and vested partner.

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<sup>1</sup>[Pennsylvania Biogas and Energy Potential | American Biogas Council](#)

<sup>2</sup>[Waste Not: NJ Digester Plant Transforms Food Waste to Fuel | Engineering News-Record](#)

<sup>3</sup>[centerpointenergy.com/en-us/corporate/about-us/news/2086](http://centerpointenergy.com/en-us/corporate/about-us/news/2086)

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today; I am happy to answer any questions you may have.