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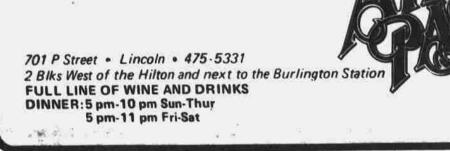
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STARSHIP

Ag Institute awarded grant

Heat from waste studied

By Kevin Field

The agriculture engineering department of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources has been awarded a Department of Energy grant to investigate the plausibility of on-farm converters to produce methane gas from animal waste.

The \$36,274 grant will be used to develop a prototype on-farm biogas digester, according to Dennis Schulte, associate professor of agricultural engineering and

director of the project.

The process produces methane gas when organic matter decays in the absence of oxygen. The process was discovered in the 17th century when scientists observed blue flames burning over swamps after electrical storms or fires, Schulte said.

"The process was not used for the production of energy, however, but as a way to stabilize sewage sludge," Schulte said. He added that the plants that do use the system usually heat their buildings with the methane produced.

During the early 70s researchers began looking at the biogas digester as a means of energy production.

"We are looking mainly at the agriculture industry. There is a tremendous amount of manure available at some of the larger feedlots where the process can be made economical," Schulte said. Methane can be used to heat homes and barns or used for drying grain, he said.

A tremendous amount of capital is required to get these operations going, so they are not available to farmers with smaller operations, Schulte said. Through research, the Ag Institute hopes to bring these costs down.

The high cost results from the equipment necessary to produce the gas.

If the whole tank is turned a thicker manure can be used and methane will still be produced. This will require less water so a smaller tank can be used. The prototype will be built in the Agricultural Annex on East Campus. If it is successful an on-farm system will be built at the Mead experimental station, Schulte said.

There are several methane production facilities currently in use throughout the United States, Schulte said. The largest is in the Oklahoma panhandle at a 75.000 head feedlot. That facility produces enough gas to heat 20,000 homes, he said.

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