

Steam plant will run on manure

Powering Md. facility with poultry waste will increase output

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Poultry house wastes would power a new steam plant in Maryland west of Seaford under a plan outlined Wednesday by Seaford-based Allen's Hatchery Inc.

Charles C. Allen III, president and chief executive officer of Allen's, said construction on the 12,000-ton per year plant was expected to begin this fall and by September 2006 could replace about 15 percent of the steam source now used at JCR Enterprises Inc., a rendering plant in Linkwood, Md., east of Cambridge and west of Laurel.

"It's providing an alternative for the farmer," Allen said.



News Journal file/GARY EMEIGH

Delaware law potentially bans waste-fired power and steam plants, but Maryland officials have been exploring the option for years.

"We continue to endorse the doctrine that we, as an industry, must continually find ways to support our farmers and maintain their economic viability," Allen said in a prepared statement.

Poultry companies and farmers have been working for years to find new uses for poultry litter, a combination of chicken manure and wood chips or similar bedding material.

Driving the effort are concerns that densely concentrated commercial animal farms produce too much animal waste for safe use as fertilizer, jeopardizing water quality and promoting blooms of toxic or oxygen-depleting algae.

The Delmarva Peninsula produced 561.2 million chickens valued at more than \$1.7 billion last year, making broiler production the region's largest farm industry. But farm operation also generated hundreds of thousands of tons of poultry litter.

New farm regulations and development of alternatives - including a 60,000 to 80,000 ton-per-year Perdue plant near Laurel that produces consumer-grade fertilizer from poultry waste - have significantly reduced estimated "surpluses" of manure across the region.

Allen said the new steam plant, endorsed by Maryland farm and environmental officials, would replace a source powered by natural gas at JCR Enterprises, a factory that renders unusable animal castoffs into proteins.

"We started this project three years ago," Allen said, before natural gas prices turned sharply upward. "The fact that natural gas has gone up obviously is a benefit, but the driving force really is to provide an alternative use for litter."

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Taxpayers have invested millions in subsidies for other poultry manure uses, including support for Perdue's plant and money used to pay some costs for hauling waste from over-fertilized areas to fields in need of plant nutrients.

Allen's employs more than 3,000 people in Delaware, Maryland and North Carolina and processes about 2.5 million birds per week. The company operates 28 poultry growing farms and works with more than 500 independent, or contract, growers.

Maryland Agriculture Secretary Lewis Riley said in a prepared statement that Allen's plan supported environmental goals set by state and poultry company officials in an agreement signed earlier this year.

Allen said that terms for securing litter from farms are unsettled.

"We will offer to buy the litter from farmers. They can sell it to us or use it or do other things," Allen said, adding that the value of litter to farmers last year was estimated at \$24 to \$28 per acre.

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