PLANNING AND CONSTRUCTION OF BIOGAS PLANTS

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Summary

German engineers have fifteen years of experience in the planning and construction of biogas plants. In the meantime, approximately 1,600 biogas plants are in operation. This is primarily due to investment funding and payment for each kWh delivered to the public energy grid. In general, three different kinds of digester types are in use for anaerobically treating manure and other organic input substrates: small horizontal digesters, medium-sized upright concrete ones and large upright steel digesters. Depending on several factors, which have to be known before engineering of the biogas plant is begun, an experienced engineer chooses the most suitable process technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-eighties, the first biogas plants for the digestion of animal manure were constructed in Germany. Denmark and East Germany focused on large centralised biogas plants; whereas in West Germany mainly farm-scale biogas plants were constructed at first. But the circumstances were very difficult, as there was no funding and no payment for the energy produced. Although there had been two previous major efforts – just after World War II and during the oil-crisis – there had been no success in establishing more than just about a dozen plants or so until the mid-eighties. After getting off to a slow start, the biogas business gradually began to become successful. In the nineties the implementation of two very important regulations favoured the economic and technical success of renewable energy in general and biogas plants in particular.

Meanwhile, after approximately 15 years of biogas engineering work, German biogas enginners have a great deal of experience in the planning and construction of biogas. Around 1,600 biogas plants will be in operation in Germany by the end of 2001. Most of them are still operated with manure and additional organic wastes (cofermentation) but the digestion of energy crops like corn, beets or grass is becoming increasingly important.

2. BASIC LAYOUT OF A BIOGAS PLANT

Basically, each biogas plant consists from the same principle components: a digester, a gas holder, a gas engine, tubes, mixers, etc. The rough layout is shown in Figure 1.

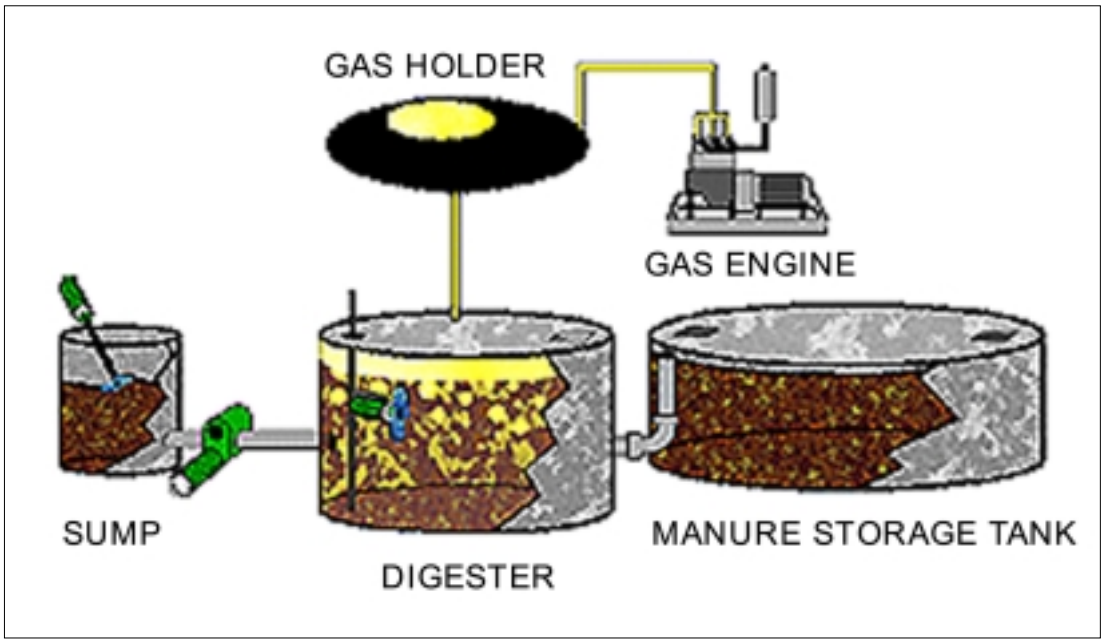

Figure 1: Basic Layout of a Biogas Plant

3. PLANNING OF BIOGAS PLANTS

The planning of biogas plants is basically not easy as considerable data is required before engineering can begin. Above all, information has to be provided about the following:

- Type of input substrate
- Quantity of input substrate
- Local circumstances
- Heat use
- Pasteurisation
- Automatisation

Based on this data for each individual farm or each separate occasion, first the basic engineering that establishes the rough technical design of the plant has to be performed. The results of this design are as follows:

- Gas prognosis
- CHP-size
- Digester size
- Flow-sheet
- Layout design
- Cost assessment

This includes the engineering office's decision about most appropriate process technology in each case. Depending on the input substrate, a process technology which enables the operator to run the biogas plant with the highest possible process stability has to be determined. Therefore, the decision has to be made between the following:

- Mesophilic and thermophilic process temperature
- One- and two-stage processes
- Type of mixing
- Type of heat input
- Wet and dry fermentation

The results of the planning determines which of the three major digesters types that are constructed in Germany will be implemented.

4. CONSTRUCTION OF BIOGAS PLANTS

4.1 Horizontal Digesters

The smallest biogas plants are often constructed with horizontal digesters, Figure 2. The material used is steel. Originally, old used tanks were taken to avoid unnecessarilyy high costs. These tanks were cleaned, reconstructed with central shafts, equipped with mixer arms, insulation, gas dome, etc., and re-used as a digester.

Today, the digester tanks are normally new and fabricated for use as a digester. Generally, the standard volume is between 50 and 150 m³. The breadth is 3,20 to a maximum of 3,50 m in order to be able to transport the tanks on German streets without additional costs. The final rigging is performed on site.

The hydraulic retention time is usually between 40 and 50 days, depending on the input substrate. The input is first heated by the heating arms, see Figure 2. When mesophilic temperatures are reached, the necessary mixing is done by standard mixing arms.

This type of tank is well-suited for treatment of dung and poultry manure as there are very good mixing conditions even for solids. Grid removal is unproblematical.

This digester type is comparatively cheap but cannot be manufactured and transported in large sizes. This makes it most suitable for small farms.

4.2 Upright Standard Agricultural Digester

The standard digester in German biogas business is the upright, concrete manufactured digester, Figure 3. The standard size is between 500 and 1,500 m³. The height is often between 5 and 6 m; the diameter varies between 10 and 20 m.

The tanks are equipped with a heating system which delivers hot water into tubes fixed along the walls. The mixer is either completely immersed or equipped with a motor located outside the tank as shown in Figure 3. Large tanks are equipped with two or more mixers. On top of the tank is a double-membrane, gas-holder roof. The inner membrane is the gas-holding buffer; the outer membrane is the weather cover. The inner membrane is flexible in height; whereas the outer one is always ball shaped, as there is a blower which delivers air pressure between the two membranes in a manner similar to that used to support an air hall. The hydraulic retention time is generally between 40 and 80 days depending on the input substrate.

This type of tank is well-suited for every kind of input substrate as long as the flow rate is low enough. Grid removal is not a problem if there is a special device for mechanically removing this grid. For this reason some tanks are equipped with a concrete roof.

This type of digester is used for the treatment of up to 10,000 m³ input per year.

4.3 Upright Large Digester

For large quantities of input substrate, for example more than 30,000 m³ per year, large upright steel digesters are in use. The steel in general is coated in order to avoid corrosion. In most cases glass-coated prefabricated steel plates are used. The standard size is between 1,500 and 5,000 m³. The height is often between 15 and 20 m, the diameter varies between 10 and 18 m.

The mixing is done by a centrally located mixer on the roof, which is in operation continuously. The input substrate is pre-heated before entering the digester. The hydraulic retention time is generally 20 days. This short retention time can be chosen because of the advantages of continuous mixing and pre-heating.

This type of digester is used for the treatment of up to 90,000 m³ input per year per single unit. Large centralised digestion plants have two or more tanks.

5. RESULTS

Most of the biogas plants in Germany are medium-sized farm-scale biogas plants. The process temperature in general is mesophilic, and the process technology is one-staged. This plant type has been constructed about 1,000 times with digester sizes between 300 and 1,500 m³. Several hundred biogas plants are equipped with horizontal digesters, mainly for small farm-scale biogas plants in South Germany. A few dozen biogas plants have been constructed with large upright digesters with external heat exchangers and centrally located mixers – basically the original Danish type.

Horizontal Digester

(50 – 150 m³ Volume)

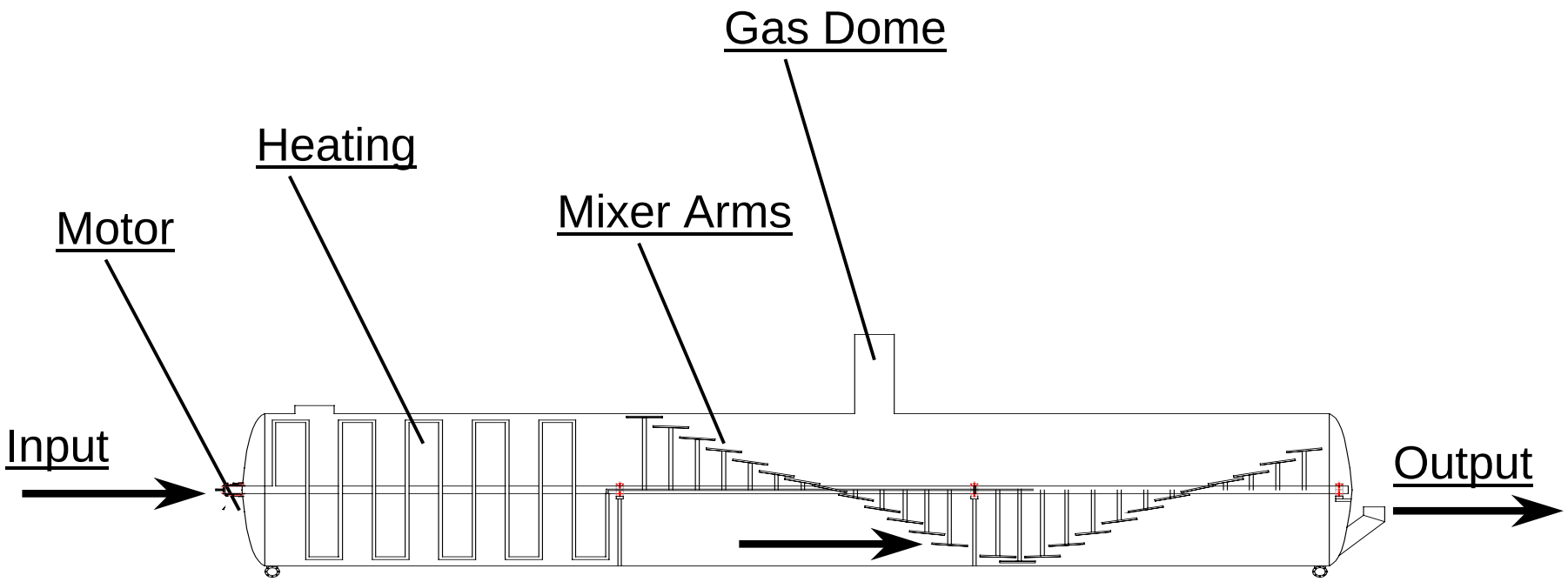

Figure 2: Horizontal Digester

Standard Digester in Agriculture

(up to 1.000 m³ Volume)

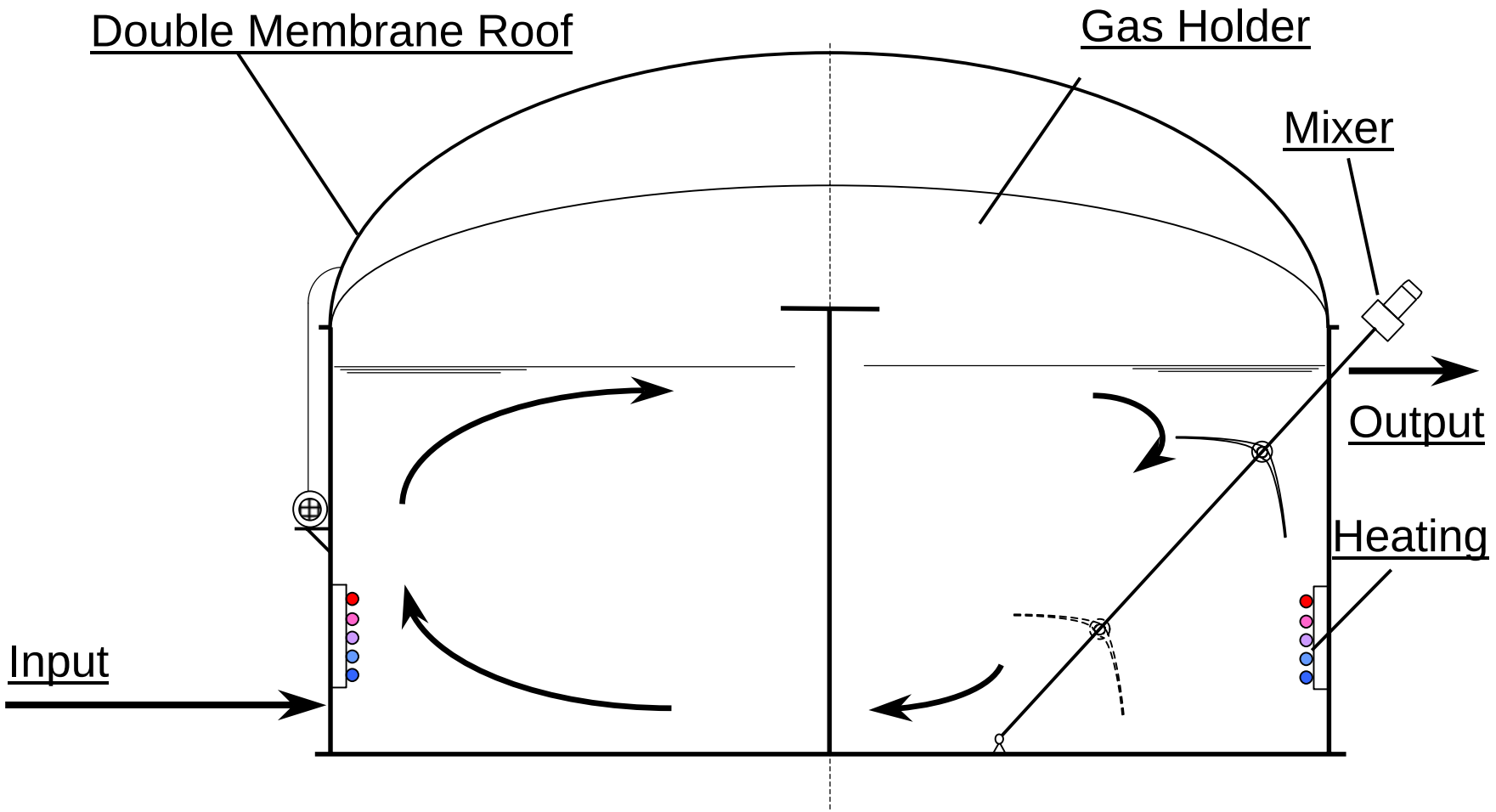

Figure 3: Standard Digester in Agriculture

Upright Large Digester

(up to 5.000 m³ Volume)

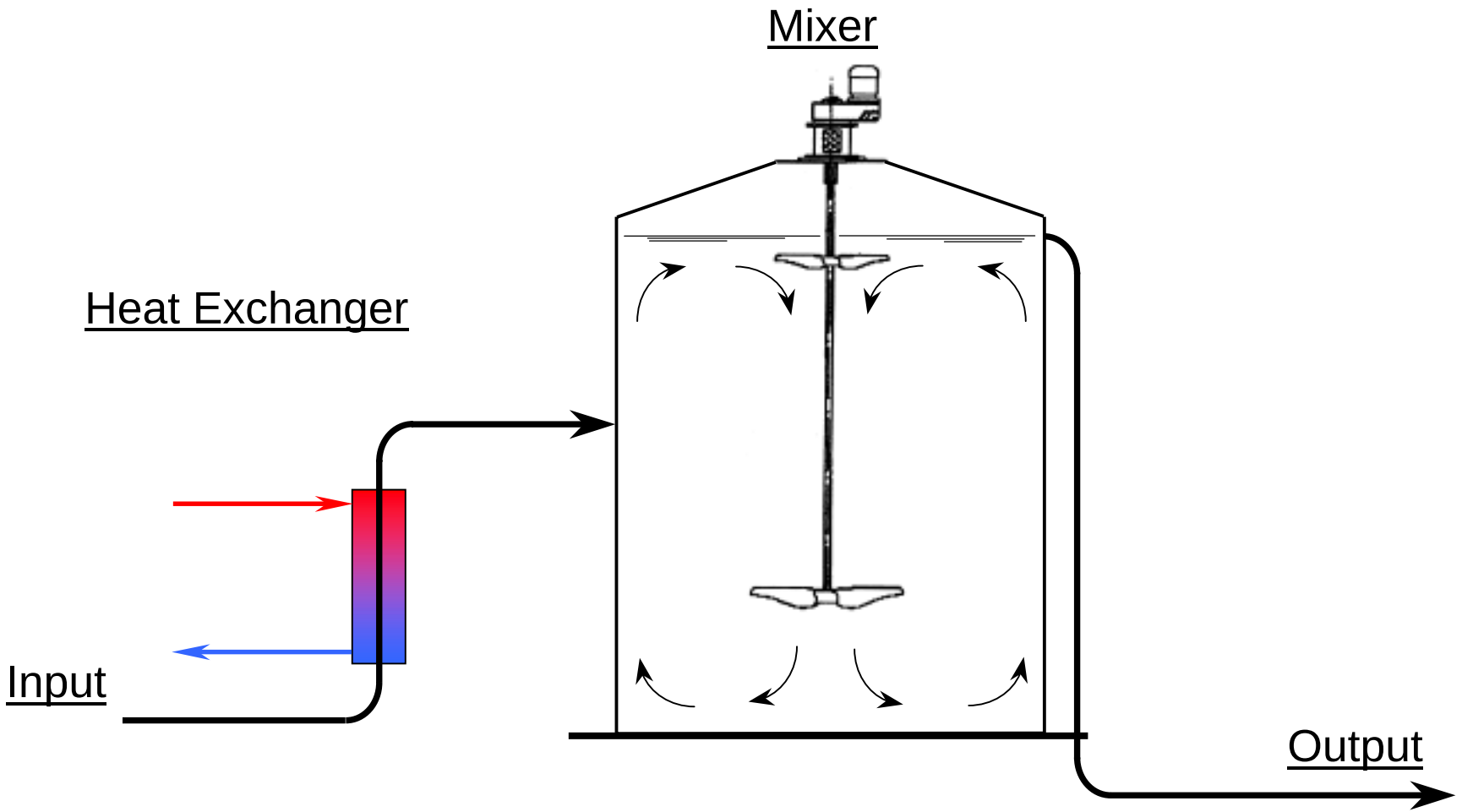

Figure 4: Upright Large Digester