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FIGHTING FOOD WASTE TO HELP FOOD AND ENERGY SECURITY

Around four million tonnes of food reaches landfill in Australia each year. There's a missed global opportunity to recover food waste and do something useful with it, particularly using it for energy to power 'circular economies.'

This will be the message given by Dr Bernadette McCabe, Associate Professor and Principal Scientist (Bioresources and Waste Utilisation) in the National Centre for Engineering in Agriculture at The University of Southern Queensland to the Crawford Fund's annual food security conference on 29 and 30 August. Titled 'Waste Not, Want Not: The Circular Economy to Food Security,' the event brings international and Australian specialists together to draw national attention to food loss and waste issues in production, in getting product to market, and in the management and reuse of waste.

"In the absence of Australian federal initiatives, our State and local governments and communities are developing projects to foster a circular economy that can absorb waste and provide usable products to assist businesses and households, and improve sustainability," said Bernadette who has expertise in the monitoring of wastewater, biogas production and assessment of biosolids as fertiliser replacement.

"The opportunities such innovation provides for the developing world are even more direct than for a Western urban population. The production of biogas from organic waste via anaerobic digestion is one such technology that fits perfectly in a circular economy and engenders the energy independence needed by these communities," said Bernadette who collaborates at an international level as National Team Leader representing Australia in the International Energy Agency Bioenergy program Task on Energy from Biogas.

"Simply disposing waste for landfill affects households, businesses and governments worldwide. It requires time, energy and space, and poses environmental risks. When waste is repurposed for energy and fertiliser, it can give businesses a competitive edge, foster sustainable growth and create jobs and help food and energy security for poorer nations."

Dr McCabe noted that in developing countries, a very limited share of waste is recovered and reused, and only major or capital cities have waste management systems. Yet, the use of waste to generate electricity could have a significant impact to alleviate energy poverty.

"The emerging trend for water management, waste management and energy to team up is most welcome and makes sense.

Dr McCabe will provide an overview of the different waste-to-energy technology options that exist and will highlight some key innovations across the globe with a particular focus on novel approaches in developing countries and their impacts on food loss and waste, livelihoods and food security.

"Whatever the driver, anything that can keep organic waste out of landfill has to be a good thing," she concluded.