

The Current

Turning Waste into Energy

Chemical engineer Michelle O'Malley's research of animals' gut microbes could enable discovery of new sustainable fuels

By Shelly Leachman

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Could the study of grass-eating animals lead to the discovery of new sustainable fuels and chemicals? It's not as far fetched as you might think.

Cows and other large herbivores evolved to graze on grasses and other woody forage and have the ability to "unlock" the energy contained in plant cellulose, and convert it to sugar. By understanding and cultivating the microbes that these animals have in their digestive system, we could use similar processes to create fuels and chemicals from agricultural waste rather than fossil fuels.

Chemical engineer discusses her work to do just that in this video from UC Santa Barbara's ongoing "Research in 60 Seconds" series.

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