



The United Sludge-Free Alliance Recommended Reading

From Brantford Expositor, Ontario, Canada

Farmers 'sickened' by sewage

ENVIRONMENT: Company defends spreading product on field

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Organic growers Ella Haley and Richard Tunstall are upset that a contractor is spreading treated sewage sludge on a field near their farm, Heart's Content. The contractor, Wessuc Inc., says the two farmers are clinging to lingering misconceptions about a product treated and released by municipalities, that is well-regulated by the Ministry of the Environment, and classified as a nutrient biosolid.

"We must sit and watch as the tractor that is injecting this sludge gets closer and closer to our property line," Haley said Thursday while the product, which comes from Waterloo Region's sewage system was being sprayed and knifed into the ground. "Truckload after truckload after truckload is being worked into the field. I'm sickened by the sight of it."

As an organic grower and leader of the grassroots group Sustainable Brant, Haley remains resolutely on the other side of a deep-seated argument over the value and safety of a product that is being applied more and more on Ontario farm fields. "Sewage sludge has been renamed biosolids to make it appear less offensive to the public and easier for municipalities to market their sewage sludge to farmers as beneficial," she said. Robin Poss, who is undertaking the job on behalf of Wessuc, says he's heard the sentiment many times over the years. "A lot of people in the city are clueless about how their sewage is treated and reused," he said.

"The sewage goes through a rigorous treatment process to ensure a safe product for land application. In the country, a lot of people are kind of NIMBY. They agree with the program in principle, but still say: 'Not in my back yard, pick some other field.'"

A dairy producer himself just outside Boston, Poss said he feels completely confident that Wessuc, which distributes biosolids from several municipalities, is applying a responsible product in a professional manner. "I see a huge value in this product, and it brings a huge benefit to the field."

He's convinced that he and organic growers like Haley are simply locked in an intractable disagreement.

Haley was so upset when she discovered the biosolids were being applied that she worked the phones until eventually she had Shane Tormey, an agricultural environmental officer with the MOE, Frank Moffat, a waste water treatment specialist with Waterloo Region, and Poss in a meeting right in the field about to be treated.

Poss did the field examination part of the application for treatment, and the two government specialists were responsible for signing off on it. They went over the paperwork with her in the

field, and told her they were satisfied the process was followed correctly.

"We followed all legislative protocols and this field was approved," said Poss. The treated sludge from a municipality is tested for 11 elements, mostly metals, then acquired by Wessuc and applied on approved fields. As the one overseeing a biosolid, he said that under ministry regulations he must investigate each field and its proximity to houses, wells and watercourses. Then he does a soil analysis, before deciding whether the field is suitable and recommending an application be approved.

"Not every field is suitable," he said. "Sometimes, for instance, I will look at a field and find excessive phosphorous or a PH imbalance, and I'll say we shouldn't do that one."

Haley and Poss eir professional quarrel Thursday, with both emailing literature and contacts to The Expositor to support their positions. Haley and Tunstall take issue with the testing of biosolids. "Province guidelines do not require testing or regulation of pathogens," Haley contends. "These contaminants become more concentrated as they travel up the food chain.

"The sludge is tested for 11 metals, which are a worry because the concentration of these metals can greatly vary. Zinc, copper, cadmium and molybdenum, in particular, can each affect plant, human or animal health. "We are appalled at the lack of proper research on the toxicity of sewage sludge, and that municipalities are allowed to dispose of it on land where food is grown."

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