

LAND APPLICATION OF TOXIC SLUDGE

Threatens Communities & Drinking Water



■ Sludge Contains Toxic Waste

Sludge is defined as “a viscous, semisolid mixture of bacteria and virus-laden organic matter, toxic metals, synthetic organic chemicals, and settled solids removed from domestic and industrial wastewater at sewage treatment plants” [HCDES]. The sewage treatment plant process concentrates up to 90% of dioxins, toxic metals, pesticides, hazardous industrial and radioactive wastes, disease-causing bacteria, viruses, and parasites in leftover sludge [IJEP, 1999]. Incredible as it seems, this toxic product is sold to the public as “soil fertilizer” and is spread on our farm and grazing lands; on school grounds, ball fields, parks and golf courses. (See *Toxic Fertilizer* Brochure)

■ From Oceans to Our Communities

After years of dumping sludge in our oceans, this practice ended in 1992 when the Ocean Dumping Ban Act of 1988 went into effect. This left municipalities and local governments with a new problem—how to get rid of the tons of sludge they generate on a daily basis. The federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) stepped in with a plan to “solve” this problem by promoting sludge (sometimes called “biosolids,” a public relations term that is used interchangeably by EPA with the technical term “sewage sludge”) as fertilizer to be spread on land—where people live, work and play. Their plan has allowed toxic chemicals into our air, water, soil, crops and into us.

■ Serious Health Effects

The past decade of applying sludge to land has resulted in contamination of farmland, parks, school grounds and water supplies. Many health problems, including deaths, have been linked to sludge exposure; some of these have been documented in medical and technical journals. [BMC, ES&T] Two wrongful death lawsuits have caused government officials and experts to sound the alert. The US Inspector General stated “While EPA promotes land application [of sludge], EPA cannot assure the public that current land application processes are protective of human health and the environment” [USIG]. Experts from EPA and Duke University cite that frequently reported health complaints from sludge exposures include eye, nose and throat irritation, headache, nausea, diarrhea, hoarseness, sore throat, cough, chest tightness, nasal congestion, palpitations, shortness of breath, stress, drowsiness, and alterations in moods [JOA]. Two children in Pennsylvania and a man in New Hampshire died from mysterious infections after sludge was spread near their homes. Lawsuits have been filed against the government for failing to adequately regulate sludge use. Adding to the toll on humans, sludge contaminates our drinking water and food supply and harms fish, wildlife, livestock and pets. It is impossible to “treat” sludge so that the toxic mix of heavy metals, synthetic organic compounds (e.g. dioxin and PCB’s), pathogens and radioactive contaminants in sewage sludge are rendered harmless. Whether it is called “biosolids” or sludge, treated or not, it is an unsafe material.

BE SAFE: Take Precautionary Action to Protect Our Communities from Toxic Sludge

BE SAFE's FOUR PRINCIPLES

1. HEED EARLY WARNING SIGNS

We must heed the early warning signs of health threats and widespread pollution from spreading sludge on our lands. Sludge can contain thousands of industrial waste products, including dozens of carcinogens, hormone disrupting chemicals, toxic metals, dioxins, radionuclides and other persistent poisons. We must prevent this toxic “hot potato” that used to be dumped in our oceans from poisoning our communities under the guise of cheap fertilizer. Several European countries have taken a precautionary approach to land application of sludge—using the philosophy of “first, do no harm”—to call for bans on its use.

2. PUT SAFETY FIRST

Land application of sludge is equal to dumping toxic waste in our communities. It contaminates our water, air and land, and can poison people, our food supply and drinking water. Thousands of self-reported illnesses attributed to sludge have been documented by Cornell and other organizations [Cornell]. We must put safety first and ban the land application of sewage sludge as is being done in Europe. Holland and Switzerland already have bans, and Sweden, France, Germany, Finland, and Luxembourg are calling for an end to this practice.

3. EXERCISE DEMOCRACY

Land application of sludge is about power and politics—not science or fertilizers. Sewage treatment plants were not designed to produce “fertilizer”. They produce a toxic sludge that needs to be properly disposed of. When sludge is spread on land, liability is transferred from the industries and municipalities that create and process it, to the landowners and farmers who spread it. We must call on the federal government to ban the land application of sludge and hold EPA accountable for failing to safely dispose of this toxic waste. We must adopt “zero discharges” policies to keep toxins out of sewers. And we must make industrial and commercial polluters responsible for the safe management of the wastes they generate, starting with the elimination of the Domestic Sewage Exemption of the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), which now allows the legal discharge of hazardous waste into sewers. (See *Zero Waste Brochure*)

4. CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTIONS

■ Sludge Information:

National Sludge Alliance, Charlotte Hartman (chartmannsa@taconic.net) and Penny Newman (penny.n@ccaej.org). For information about sludge victims, contact Helene Shields (hshields@worldpath.net)

BE SAFE is coordinated by the Center for Health, Environment & Justice. Contact us at CHEJ, P.O. Box 6806, Falls Church, VA 22040, 703-237-2249, or 518-732-4538, or visit www.besafenet.com

Websites:

Pennsylvania Environmental Network:
www.penweb.org/issues/sludge
The ReSource Institute for Low Entropy Systems:
www.riles.org/library.htm
Loudoun Neighbors Against Toxic Sludge:
www.LoudonNATS.org
Cornell Waste Management Institute:
www.cfe.cornell.edu/wmi
Dr. David Lewis: members.aol.com/lewisdavel/

Groups:

Hundreds of grassroots groups are working to stop the land application of sludge, such as *Citizens for a Future New Hampshire* (NH), *Coalition of Residents Organized for Political Self-expression* (PA), *Citizens Against Pollution* (AL), *TOXICS* (MN), *Safe Food and Fertilizer* (WA), *The Maine Sludge Alliance* (ME), *California Communities Against Toxics* (CA), *Neighbors Against Toxic Sludge* (VA), *Blackland Prairie Concerned Citizens Association* (TX), and the *Kern Food Growers Against Sewage Sludge* (CA). To get involved, contact environmental, food safety, or agriculture organizations near you and ask if they have a program to stop the land application of sludge. If they don't, start one!

■ Sample Sludge Ordinances:

The Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund:
www.celdf.org/scm/ord.asp

■ Your Vote Counts.

The next election will set the country's course on water protection policies and sewage sludge practices. For information on environmental voting records, contact www.sierraclub.org and www.lcv.org. To register to vote, contact www.earthday.net.

■ BE SAFE.

Take precautionary action to ban land application of sludge. Sign on to the BE SAFE Platform on the next page. Be counted when we deliver this national Platform to the White House in 2005. Endorse the BE SAFE Platform today at www.besafenet.com.

References:

Harper-Collins Dictionary of Environmental Science (HCDES); *Land Application of Sewage Sludge*, International Journal of Environment & Pollution (IJEP), 1999; Biomed Central Public Health, 2002 2:11 [BMC]; Environmental Science & Technology, July 2002 [ES&T]; U.S. Inspector General Statement, April 2000 [USIG]; Journal of Agromedicine, Nov. 2000, Dr. Susan Schiffman, Duke University and Dr. John Walker, US EPA [JOA]; www.sierraclub.org/policy/conservation/solidwaste.asp. [SC]; Cornell Waste Management Institute, *Clustering of Biosolid Land-Application Alleged Health Incidents by Locality*, <http://www.cfe.cornell.edu/wmi/Sludge/incidents.htm> (Updated Feb. 10, 2003) [Cornell]; and *Boyceland Dairy v. City of Augusta*, NO. 2001-RCCV-126 Richmond County Super. CT, Oct. 2003.
Primary Contributors: Charlotte Hartman, National Sludge Alliance; Caroline Snyder, Sierra Club Sludge Task Force.

Students Successfully Ban Use of Toxic Sludge

"At a time when the public has heightened concerns about biochemical and nuclear threats from outside forces, we certainly don't need our own government to be foisting these same deadly poisons onto our parks and playgrounds, and onto food being grown for our dinner plates." Tasha Klubock, University of Colorado

Colorado University students won a victory in their battle against a utility that was marketing sewage sludge containing nuclear and hazardous waste under the name "MetroGro." Through the Colorado Open Records Act, students obtained documents revealing Denver's Metro Wastewater Reclamation District distributed this radioactive and toxic sludge reclaimed from the nearby Lowry Landfill Superfund site without labels or warnings of any kind. The sludge had been sold to Colorado public schools, municipalities for use on parks and golf courses, and private parties seeking a cheap source of "fertilizer". The Widefield School District was one of the largest sludge recipients, and when notified by students in 2001, refused any future shipments of MetroGro.

For more information about a plan to turn radioactive Superfund wastes into "beneficial biosolids", see *Dirty Secrets*, a Special Investigation by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Eileen Welsome, at www.westword.com/issues/2001-04-12/feature.html/1/index.html.

Coalition Seeks EPA Sludge Ban

A coalition of 73 labor, environmental, and farm groups on October 7, 2003 petitioned the Environmental Protection Agency to place an immediate moratorium on the land application of sewage sludge and ultimately prohibit the practice. This action was taken after a Georgia court ruled that land application of sewage sludge - in compliance with EPA's sludge rules - caused the deaths of 300 prized dairy cows at the Boyce family farm in Burke County, Georgia [*Boyceland Dairy v. City of Augusta* 2003.]. A formal denial of the Petition by EPA on December 31, 2003 contains misleading and inaccurate information that has renewed efforts by the Petitioners to ban the land application of sludge based on the facts presented in the petition. For more information: www.centerforfoodsafety.org

BE SAFE Platform

In the 21st century, we envision a world in which our food, water and air are clean, and our children grow up healthy and thrive. Everyone needs a protected, safe community and workplace, and natural environment to enjoy. We can make this world vision a reality. The tools we bring to this work are prevention, safety, responsibility and democracy.

Our goal is to prevent pollution and environmental destruction before it happens. We support this precautionary approach because it is preventive medicine for our environment and health. It makes sense to:

- *Prevent pollution and make polluters, not taxpayers, pay and assume responsibility for the damage they cause;*
- *Protect our children from chemical and radioactive exposures to avoid illness and suffering;*
- *Promote use of safe, renewable, non-toxic technologies;*
- *Provide a natural environment we can all enjoy with clean air, swimmable, fishable water and stewardship for our national forests.*

*We choose a “better safe than sorry” approach motivated by caution and prevention.
We endorse the common-sense approach outlined in the four principles listed below.*

Platform Principles

HEED EARLY WARNINGS

Government and industry have a duty to prevent harm, when there is credible evidence that harm is occurring or is likely to occur—even when the exact nature and full magnitude of harm is not yet proven.

PUT SAFETY FIRST

Industry and government have a responsibility to thoroughly study the potential for harm from a new chemical or technology before it is used—rather than assume it is harmless until proven otherwise. We need to ensure it is safe now, or we will be sorry later. Research on impacts to workers and the public needs to be confirmed by independent third parties.

EXERCISE DEMOCRACY

Precautionary decisions place the highest priority on protecting health and the environment, and help develop cleaner technologies and industries with effective safeguards and enforcement. Government and industry decisions should be based on meaningful citizen input and mutual respect (the golden rule), with the highest regard for those whose health may be affected and for our irreplaceable natural resources—not for those with financial interests. Uncompromised science should inform public policy.

CHOOSE THE SAFEST SOLUTION

Decision-making by government, industry and individuals must include an evaluation of alternatives, and the choice of the safest, technically feasible solutions. We support innovation and promotion of technologies and solutions that create a healthy environment and economy, and protect our natural resources.

Take precautionary action and ban land application of sludge. Sign onto the BE SAFE Platform.

Be counted when we deliver this national platform to the White House in 2005. Endorse the platform today at www.besafenet.com

BE SAFE is coordinated by the Center for Health, Environment & Justice. To sign the platform or for more information, contact us at CHEJ, P.O. Box 6806, Falls Church, VA 22040, 703-237-2249, or 518-732-4538, or visit www.besafenet.com

