

Addressing an environmental 'ick' factor

Use of biosolids on local farms is a controversial issue

By GORDON DELANEY Valley Bureau

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Patrons of the Wolfville Farmers Market buy locally grown products. The market will not accept vendors who use biosolids in their food production. (GORDON DELANEY / Valley Bureau)

Growing concern over the use of biosolids on farmland has more to do with the "ick factor" than science, says a provincial Environment Department official.

Michael Langman, a soil scientist and senior policy adviser with the department, said in a recent interview that there is a perception among the public that "something must be wrong because of where the material comes from."

"But we're trying to address that ick factor and the concerns," Mr. Langman said.

Some farmers in the province are using biosolids as fertilizer on their farmland because it's much cheaper than conventional fertilizers. The material comes from the N-Viro facility near Halifax. It treats human, commercial and industrial sewage sludge to destroy

bacteria.

The Nova Scotia Environmental Network has asked for a ban on its use on farm and public lands in the province, arguing that biosolids contain contaminants that are not destroyed in the treatment process. It also has requested a plebiscite on the issue.

It says that N-Viro hopes to see as much as 34,000 tonnes of the material spread on 4,800 hectares of land in Nova Scotia each year.

Kings County council recently passed a motion seeking a ban on its use in the county until more study is done. Warden Fred Whalen has written Environment Minister Sterling Belliveau asking for a temporary moratorium but hasn't yet received a reply.

The province placed a temporary moratorium on its use in 2003 and held public meetings, workshops and discussions with scientists, which resulted in the lifting of the ban.

Mr. Langman said he believes that the province, under newly revised guidelines governing the use of biosolids, has some of the most stringent controls and regulations in the world. Environmentalists say the guidelines don't mean much because they are unenforceable.

"The standards we are setting for metals and pathogens in biosolids are exactly the same as the national standards set for compost," Mr. Langman said.

Biosolids are used on farmland around the world and in every province in Canada, he said.

"This isn't new. Biosolids have been land applied for years all over North America for 50 years or more."

He said farmers are using the material on a regular basis in Ontario and have not experienced any environmental or health problems.

"It's the perception about the marketability of local food. That really is the issue," said Mr. Langman, who is a co-chairman of the Biosolids Task Group, a national committee under the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment.

Part of the group's work is to look at possible contaminants and pathogens in biosolids.

Mr. Langman said the sewage treatment process doesn't remove all heavy metals, but the concentrations are so low as to be negligible to human health.

He said some food grown internationally and imported into Canada is grown using biosolids, and "some of those products don't have anywhere near the treatment standards that we use in Canada."

Mr. Langman said there has been enough research on the subject that he feels comfortable with the province's decision to allow land application of the material.

But some people and groups remain concerned about its use.

Marilyn Cameron, chairwoman of the environmental network's biosolids and waste-water caucus, said in a recent interview that there are potentially thousands of unknown contaminants in treated sewage sludge that could be harmful to human health.

They include flame retardant, chlorine, pharmaceuticals and even radioactive chemicals.

She said there could be up to 90,000 potential pollutants in sewage sludge.

"And what we know about them is the tiniest tip of the iceberg."

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