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Mar 01 2022

Independent Regulatory
Review Commission

January 22, 2022 Lancaster Farming

Suspend Practice of Sludge on Farmland

Editor:

I read with particular interest, as well as alarm, the front-page article entitled "Deer to Be Tested for 'Forever Chemicals'" in last week's Lancaster Farming.

This article highlights how much remains to be done to understand the health impacts of the common practice of disposing of sewage sludge on farmland.

Sewage sludge, or biosolids, a more kindly reference, is effluent from wastewater treatment plants, which includes a large number of waste products, including hazardous or toxic waste from heavy industry.

This waste is tested for a limited number of toxic elements, so many dangerous elements may remain after waste passes through treatment plants and is converted into sludge.

A huge quantity of sludge is produced within the more than 400 sewage treatment plants located in Pennsylvania.

By far, the cheapest manner of disposal is on farmland, rather than utilizing special landfills that are safer but more costly to build and maintain and, in general, do not provide sufficient capacity.

Farmland soils on which sludge is being applied are not being adequately monitored for accumulation of toxic substances.

Most importantly, the crops themselves are not being tested for the uptake of toxins.

As reported in last week's Lancaster Farming, deer tested in Maine have reportedly ingested PFAS, a forever chemical, after feeding on plants growing on sludged farmland.

The health of fish in our own Neshaminy Creek basin also appears to be threatened.

According to Sludge News, a 2018 report by the Environmental Protection Agency Office of Inspector General has documented that the EPA is unable to assess the impact of hundreds of unregulated pollutants in land-applied biosolids on human health and the environment.

Sludge News reports that EPA has taken claims about the safety of sludge off its website.

As citizens, consumers and elected officials, we all should be alarmed about the potential risks posed to our health from current practices of depositing sludge on farmland where it can impact the safety of our food and our water.

Specialized landfills should be considered until we can find other disposal methods that do not involve polluting the air, our food or our water.

— Paul J. Solomon
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