

Biosoilds ? not the only option

Dear editor:

If municipal jurisdictions in Canada are concerned enough to implement regulations demanding lawn care companies change their weed kill practices (plus post signs warning the public of inherent dangers to children and pets), then concerned citizens in Ontario should be able to raise pointed questions concerning the application of sewage sludge/biosolids on agricultural lands. Moreover, given that recommendations from national and international scientific research suggest that current testing methods and regulations for managing land spreading of sludge/biosolids are inadequate, stricter controls are almost certainly needed to be discussed and enacted in Ontario.

Numerous reasons justify this course of action. First and foremost, our health and well-being requires food sources that are free of pollutants, toxins, bacteria, viruses and chemicals. Second, as good stewards of the land, groundwater and watercourses, we need to ensure that municipal jurisdictions are adopting regulations current with bio-solid research, as recommended by the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment in 2012.

Both municipal elected officials and staff together need to be held accountable and liable for unacceptable levels of contaminants in our food chain, just as municipal councillors in Ontario can be held liable for negligent decisions regarding the delivery of safe drinking water to their constituents.

Sewage sludge/biosolids does not just consist of organic waste material and/or waste from domestic households; there exist significant knowledge gaps and research as to the long term impact of industrial effluents, hospital waste, chemicals, metals and pharmaceuticals (both before and after processing) on human health.

Scientific research suggests that some of these substances can be phytotoxic and/or toxic to humans and animals, and while processing may reduce the risks, it does not eliminate them. Evidence points to the concentration levels of heavy metals, toxic chemicals and pathogens (including human germs, bacteria, viruses, and parasites), suggesting that our current allowable limits are still too high. While at this point, it appears there is no agreed upon solution for dealing with the effects of cumulative soil retention of heavy metals and pathogens on certain crops and land uses, it does not mean that there will not be conclusive and damning evidence ? as it pertains to the health of humans, animals and plants ? in the months and years ahead.

This is why concerned citizens must collectively demand stricter standards on the use of this once considered hazardous waste material ? marketed as fertilizer and rich soil after being processed -- on our agricultural lands. We need to demand that governments and regulatory bodies implement specific legislation and regulations that control the concentrations of potentially toxic elements and contaminants in the soil. Like our front lawns, farm fields containing spread sludge/biosolids should be clearly identified to prevent possible risk to our children, pets and wildlife. But there are other considerations as well.

The farming community as a whole requires groundwater to supply all the farms in the community, and therefore, there is a moral obligation to ensure that neighbouring farms are not put at risk, because one farmer uses sludge/biosolids. In this capacity, it might be reasonable to request that farmers who use sludge/biosolids be similarly required to note the same on farm real estate disclosure forms so that there is a historical record, down the road. Certainly, it is reasonable to expect that all farm products harvested from these same agricultural lands be specifically labelled at the supermarket so that consumers are fully informed of the potential risks when purchasing food.

To protect farmers from liability issues down the road, I firmly believe there needs to be strict legislation banning the use of any sludge/biosolids on farmland that contains industrial and hospital discharges. Those who argue that there is an agronomic benefit to the crops should be forced to pay every year for a complete soil nutrient analysis for these sites to ensure the site soil even needs sludge/biosolids nutrients, and subsequently, be forced to test for metals, pollutants, contaminants, and dioxins in quarterly intervals after sludge/biosolids spreading takes place.

The scriptures state ? ?except those days be shortened, no one would survive.? (Matthew 24:22) It doesn't have to be this way. As faithful stewards of the land, citizens have a legal right to demand stricter standards and regulations on any product that has the potential to jeopardize or negatively impact our food supply. If this means developing new strategies for financially supporting our local farmers so that sludge/biosolids is not their only option, then let's work together on that outcome too. But whatever we do, let's not sell out our grandchildren's destiny to initiatives that prevail against common sense.

Janice McKendrick,

Mount Forest