

## Committee forms to 'protect' Mill Canyon area from application of bio-solids in grain fields

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Feeling threatened by proposals to spread municipal sewage sludge on nearby agricultural land, residents and farmers in the Mill Canyon area near Davenport this week announced the creation of the "Protect Mill Canyon Watershed" citizens' committee to protect the area's water resources and ecology.

The group has established a website ([www.protectmillcanyon.org](http://www.protectmillcanyon.org)) where it details the background for members' concerns. Committee members listed there include Morton Alexander, Corrina Barrett, Ernest Barrett, Laura Harris, Paige Kennedy and Timothy Pellow, along with grant writer Jill Herrera, legal advisor Rachael Paschal Osborn, and science advisor Don Hansen, a design engineer with the Washington State Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) office.

For more than a year, canyon residents have been organizing resistance to the plans of neighboring Rosman Farms to apply municipal sewage sludge to its grain fields bordering the canyon. Also called "bio-solids," sewage sludge is known to contain toxic contaminants.

"The science Community is very divided on the safety of this practice," Alexander wrote in a news release sent to the Times on Wednesday. He describes himself as a canyon resident and landowner. "Unfortunately, the state Department of Ecology (DOE) sees little controversy and only thinly regulates it. We can't just sit by and do nothing as sewage from unknown sources is trucked in and dumped on our rural community."

Rosman Farms has applied for a DOE permit to apply sewage sludge to fields near Mill Canyon, Alexander continued, adding that the agency has yet to issue the permit. Meanwhile, "alarmed" local citizens are organizing to stop the permit and prevent "bio-solids" application which threatens their drinking and irrigation water supply and could end up in their air from blowing dust, he said.

Mill Creek, a tributary to the Spokane River, runs through the canyon; Consequently, the Spokane River could also be contaminated if "bio-solids" are applied to the grain fields there, Alexander contends.

Mill Canyon is home to residents who tend both commercial and amateur organic farms and gardens, some of which have been tended organically for more than 50 years. Among them: Tolstoy Farms, one of the oldest secular intentional communities in the U.S. and most well-known organic farms in the region that supplies produce to hundreds of customers. It operates a market garden that has been certified organic for nearly 20 years, helped create the Spokane Farmers Market, and was at the forefront of introducing fresh, local, organic produce to Spokane.

Although the irrigation source for Tolstoy Farms is not downstream from Rosman Farms' fields, there is much concern for the possible effect to their neighbors' land and drinking water, as well as the unpredictability of drift through air and seasonal flooding, Alexander said. One such flooding episode occurred in 2014.

“No farm exists in a bubble,” noted Pellow, a committee member and organic farmer. “The National Organic Program regulations state that as an organic farmer, you are responsible for all materials applied to your fields, even when you do not apply those materials yourself. Thus, the threat of windborne or waterborne contaminants. Our commitment to healthy organic land stewardship is what draws our customers to us, what makes our business thrive. Our hundreds of families in the Spokane area and dozens in the Davenport area who consume our produce do so for the security this knowledge provides. It is important to them, and personally important to us, that our soils and food not be contaminated by us, or as much as we have control over it, by the actions of others.”

Much of Rosman Farms’ land, perched above the canyon and its waterways, is classified by the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service as highly erodible land (HEL). This has led some soil scientists to warn that it is the worst place to experiment with “bio-solids” as a soil amendment. “Bio-solids” contain both known and unknown toxic contaminants— some are unknown because they are not tested for, and “bio-solids” may contain anything that has been disposed of in municipal sewage and waste water.

With support from the Sierra Club, the Columbia Institute for Water Policy and the Northwest Fund for the Environment, Mill Canyon neighbors are preparing an appeal in case the DOE approves the permit request. If the permit is ultimately denied, a precedent will be set for protecting the health and well-being of rural residences in many other communities, Alexander Said.

The local committee intends its website to provide information to the public and generate “allies in its struggle.”