

WA group starts campaign to stop use of biosolids on ag land

By Matthew Weaver - Capital Press
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Members of the Protect Mill Canyon Watershed citizen committee in Eastern Washington are launching a letter-writing campaign asking the state to deny a permit to a company to apply biosolids to a Davenport, Wash., farm, and stop approving permits for applications to agricultural lands until existing science is reviewed.



Washington State Department of Ecology communications manager accepts a copy of the press release from Protect Mill Canyon Watershed citizen committee members Morton Alexander and Chrys Ostrander Sept. 6 outside Ecology's office in Spokane.

SPOKANE — A Washington citizen committee is asking the state to stop the use of biosolids on agricultural lands until existing science is thoroughly reviewed.

In a Sept. 6 press conference outside the state Department of Ecology office in Spokane, the Protect Mill Canyon Watershed announced a grassroots letter-writing campaign in hopes of generating “hundreds of email messages” to Gov. Jay Inslee and Ecology director Maia Bellon.

The group requested a moratorium on any further permit approvals for the application of biosolids — treated solid waste from waste water treatment plants — on agricultural lands until a review is completed and the findings incorporated into reworked regulations.

The committee formed to protest a permit by Fire Mountain Farms, an Onalaska, Wash., company, to apply biosolids to several sites, including Rosman Farms near Davenport, Wash. The committee includes members of Tolstoy Farms, which produces organic produce. The committee is asking that the permit be denied.

The committee claims it’s impossible to know what all would be in the biosolids applied to the soil. Ecology says research indicates that biosolids do not pose a threat to human health or the environment when applied according to permit requirements. A department hydrogeologist determined the proposal poses no threat to surface or groundwater.

Fourteen people attended the press conference in support of the committee.

Committee member Chrys Ostrander said there’s no deadline for emails to Inslee or Bellon.

Asked how many letters he expects the campaign to generate, he cited the example of Azure Farms in Oregon's Sherman County. Sherman County threatened to spray weeds on the organic farm if they weren't brought under control. Conventional weed killers would have cost the farm its organic certification. The farm put out word on social media and the county office received an estimated 59,000 emails.

"There's the upper limit," Ostrander said.

Azure Farms and Sherman County have agreed to a weed control plan.

Ostrander said he believes the campaign has a "good chance of success."

Ecology says a final decision on Fire Mountain Farms' permit on the site near Davenport and a response to the committee's concerns will be released at the same time, within the next month. The company's permit for statewide application has been approved.

"The biosolids program is the highest-regulated agricultural fertilizer rule out there," said Wayne Krafft, section manager for the department's Waste 2 Resources program in Spokane.

The rule limits the amount of material that can go in the ground, requires buffers around the land application and includes restrictions against applying biosolids on frozen ground, Krafft said.

Even in the event of a major problem, Krafft said, the amount of material put on the ground is "very, very low," about the equivalent of fertilizing a lawn.

"The amount of chemicals of concern is minute," he said.