

Ecology grants Webb Hill facility final coverage, grace period

Arla Shephard Bull, Mason County Life Published 8:51 a.m. PT Nov. 6, 2017

The Department of Ecology has granted BioRecycling Corporation, a septage and raw sewage treatment facility in Lewis and Mason County, final coverage under the general permit for biosolids management, provided the facility follows new guidelines to protect groundwater.

The company's North Ranch facility in Union, known locally as the Webb Hill facility, has garnered controversy among residents for decades, particularly since 2008, when BioRecycling revealed it had elevated levels of nitrates at three monitoring wells on its 290-acre site.

At a public hearing in March, BioRecycling operations manager Brian Hickey indicated that the facility would construct a double-lined lagoon to store treated wastewater and septage, known as biosolids, during the winter, to bring down nitrate levels in groundwater and soils.

Ecology has granted BioRecycling a one-year grace period to continue to apply biosolids to the soil in the winter, as long as the facility works on a plan to manage the nitrate problem.

"Solving their winter-time issues, the way they've chosen to do that is constructing a lagoon, so we said in the time frame it takes you to design and construct the lagoon, we will allow you to apply this winter," said Peter Lyon, section manager of Ecology's southwest regional office.

BioRecycling must also comply with 13 requirements to maintain its permit, which range from notifying Ecology within 24 hours if it is out of compliance with any requirement, to following a new Biosolids Application Management Matrix that Ecology created specifically for this site.

The new conditions include additional soil sampling and reporting to Ecology, and the matrix provides a framework for what the facility must do if soil samples show nitrate levels above and excessively above the target range, such as ceasing application entirely.

BioRecycling also has 30 days from Oct. 24, the date Ecology issued the full coverage notice, to submit a plan to Ecology detailing how the facility will come into compliance with the new matrix before Sept. 30, 2018.

And if the plan to come into compliance with the matrix does involve constructing a lagoon, BioRecycling must submit its construction proposal — including design and construction schedules, engineering reports, scale drawings, design specifications and more — to Ecology.

"There are deliverables they have to give as far as construction goes," Lyon said. "In their initial application, they talked about the possibility of constructing a lagoon. At the hearing, they were more adamant that that was what they were going to do. So it's taken us time to clarify language and our expectations should they go down that avenue."

The site has unique issues, Lyon continued, which has forced Ecology to evaluate different proposals and come up with unique approaches to managing the nitrate problem.

Most notably, the Biosolids Application Management Matrix is a new tool that Ecology developed with the hope that the agency will be able to reuse it in some form with other facilities, said Kelsey Dunne, Ecology permit manager.

“We’ve incorporated some tools from Whatcom County and the dairy industry to the BAMM, and we hope this will help some of our facilities learn when to land apply based on precipitation,” she said. “This was one of the major concerns of the hearing.”

BioRecycling opened its Webb Hill facility in 1992 and is one of the only companies in the state that receives biosolids from wastewater treatment plants and untreated waste from septic tanks to further treat to meet the Environmental Protection Agency’s Class B biosolids standards.

Biosolids are the organic byproduct that comes from the treatment of wastewater and the contents of a septic tank; biosolids that meet EPA’s Class B standards can be applied to land to fertilize soil, adding nutrients and improving soil quality.

In Mason County, the company uses an alkaline stabilization method to treat wastewater and sprays the biosolids onto an adjacent 293-acre site year-round.

In 2008, BioRecycling found nitrate levels as high as 13.3 milligrams per liter at three monitoring wells on site, above the state’s recommended safe drinking water limit of 10 milligrams per liter. Excess nitrate in drinking water can restrict oxygen transport in the blood.

Residents have urged the facility to stop applying biosolids to the soil in the winter months, when precipitation rises and crops are less able to take in nitrates.

“This was an ill-conceived idea from the very beginning with applying toxic things into the ground,” said Union resident Pat Vandehey at the March hearing. “They never thought about what happens when it’s reached a saturation point and they’re not going to be able to put it on anymore. Something has to be done at that point, but nobody seems to look ahead to the future.”

While some residents have urged BioRecycling to cease land application this winter, the company has noted that a moratorium could have adverse economic and environmental effects.

“(A) shutdown ... would likely mean that septic tank companies in Mason County ... would be forced to haul farther away,” said Roger Hickey of BioRecycling in a comment to Ecology. “This will increase their costs (leading to) their customers unnecessarily putting off having their tanks pumped. This would have a negative impact on groundwater.”

Over the past two years, even with winter application, fall soil nitrate numbers have been within the target range under the proposed matrix, based on a site-wide average, Roger Hickey added. Two fields remain above the target range.

BioRecycling’s general permit is valid until Sept. 4, 2020. The company has been operating its facility under provisional coverage since Sept. 4, 2015, and has cooperated with Ecology as both entities have revised the permit application and permit requirements.

BioRecycling and any person with standing, including interested parties on BioRecycling and Ecology’s mailing list, can appeal the final coverage permit by Nov. 23.

Questions can be directed to Kelsey Dunne at P.O. Box 47775 Olympia, WA 98504, 360-407-6055 or Kelsey.Dunne@ecy.wa.gov.

For more information, including a complete list of the requirements under the final coverage letter, visit www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/swfa/biosolids/commentPeriodNorthRanch.html.