

# Ecology: No threat in biosolid use on ag lands

An Onalaska, Wash., company wants to apply biosolids from city waste water treatment plants to farmland near Davenport.

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Capital Press File A proposal to apply biosolids to farmland in Washington state has sparked opposition.

The state Department of Ecology says there's no risk to applying biosolids to an agricultural field in Eastern Washington despite the concerns of neighbors.

Fire Mountain Farms, of Onalaska, Wash., is seeking state permits to apply biosolids — treated solid waste from waste water treatment plants — to several sites, including Rosman Farms near Davenport, Wash. The company is already permitted in various counties in Oregon and Washington.

A committee of neighbors, called Protect Mill Canyon Watershed, formed to protest the requested permit.

"Nobody knows, really, what is in biosolids because it's impossible to know what somebody in some city somewhere far away happened to throw down their drain that day, that month or habitually," said Chrys Ostrander, a member of the committee.

Research indicates that biosolids do not pose a threat to human health or the environment when applied according to permit requirements, said Joye Redfield-Wilder, communications manager for Ecology's central regional

office.

"Our hydrogeologist has studied the proposal and finds that there are no threats to surface or groundwater," she said.

The source of the biosolids has not yet been identified, but would most likely be from the smaller rural towns within a 30-40 miles radius of the site, Redfield-Wilder said.

Ostrander isn't aware of any specific problem occurring as a result of the use of biosolids. The committee has posted several scientific documents supporting its views on its website, he said.

If municipal sewage sludge does not meet federal quality standards, it cannot be classified as biosolids and applied to the land, said Robert Thode, president and owner of Fire Mountain Farms.

“Their concerns are simply not founded in proven science,” Thode said. “A recent risk assessment by Kennedy/Jenks (consultants) and the University of Washington found that you would have to work with biosolids for many, many lifetimes before you would even get one dose of ibuprofen. Most of us won’t live that long.”

Ostrander blames a political effort that promotes the use of biosolids. More definitive research needs to be done, he said.

Bill Schillinger is six years into an eight-year biosolids research project at Washington State University’s dryland research station in Lind.

Schillinger and colleagues plan to publish papers that say there’s no significant difference in dust emissions and no new fungi added to the soil that were not already naturally occurring.

Negatives include an odor that lasts several days — “It’s not that bad, in my opinion,” Schillinger said — and the possibility of introducing heavy metals.

“You don’t know what people are flushing down their toilet,” Schillinger said. “But these are tested and approved by our own Washington State Department of Ecology and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency at prescribed rates. It’s gone through some pretty solid environmental scrutiny by the environmental agencies.”

Ecology is developing a response to the group’s comments and will make a determination on Fire Mountain Farms’ application within the next 45 days, Redfield-Wilder said.

Thode’s company is waiting for Ecology’s response. If needed, the company will address any problems raised in comments, he said.

Thode said the regulatory system is “so complex and time-consuming” that he recommends farmers hire consultants or experienced contractors when seeking approval to use biosolids.