

National Experts Respond to Biosolids Questions, Critics at Tampa D.E.P. Hearing; Meeting Addresses the Safety, Science, Regulatory Protections And Local Concerns

TAMPA, Fla., Jan 15, 2003 /PRNewswire-FirstCall via COMTEX/ -- The land application of treated sewage sludge (biosolids) for agriculture is a safe and environmentally beneficial practice, several national experts told Florida Department of Environmental Protection (D.E.P.) officials and local residents on Wednesday in Tampa.

The public meeting, held by Florida's D.E.P. at 3804 Coconut Palm Drive, featured an overview of current land application issues, discussion of potential regulatory changes, public comments and remarks by biosolids industry representatives.

"After flushing the toilet most people don't think about where their waste goes or where it may end up. When you or I wash our hands, what goes down the drain goes to a wastewater treatment facility," explained Bob O'Dette, Vice President of Technical Services for Synagro Technologies ([SYGR](#)), the nation's leading provider of residual management services. Synagro operates in Florida and 34 other states. "The waste is processed and treated and the water is cleaned and returned to our streams, rivers and lakes. The solids remaining are further treated to reduce pathogens and pollutants and then recycled as a nutrient rich fertilizer on farmland," O'Dette told the Tampa audience.

Biosolids recycling is the most environmentally beneficial use of this product, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Land applications of biosolids have been safely practice throughout the U.S. for over 30 years, said O'Dette.

Dr. Ian Pepper, a nationally known scientist and Director of the National Science Foundation Water Quality Center at the University of Arizona, responded to the growing concerns by some Florida residents in a statement distributed at the meeting. "Recent controversy over the land application of biosolids has been characterized by allegations and misinformation rather than sound scientific studies. Additionally, the public has been confused and at times scared by anecdotal reports that link land application to adverse public health effects. Therefore, what is needed are more scientific studies and education of the public on the results of these studies," Pepper said.

Pepper participated in an 18-month study for the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) on the science and safety of biosolids. "Biosolids Applied to Land: Advancing Standards and Practices," the 266-page report by a 16-member panel of national scientists, of which Ian Pepper was a member, said in its overarching findings: "There is no documented scientific evidence that the Part 503 Rule (EPA's regulations) has failed to protect public health. However, additional scientific work is needed to reduce persistent uncertainty about the potential for adverse human health effects from exposure to biosolids. There have been anecdotal allegations of disease, and many scientific advances have occurred since the Part 503 Rule was promulgated (in 1993)."

While the NAS panel recommended a number of steps to further ensure the public about the safety of biosolids land application, including additional resources for the EPA to support its biosolids regulatory program, the report said that the NAS panel "recognizes that land application of biosolids is a widely used, practical option for managing the large volume of sewage sludge generated at wastewater treatment plants that otherwise would largely need to be disposed of at landfills or by incineration."

Dr. Pepper's latest research findings, which have been targeted to fill the science information gaps outlined in the NAS report, include his work in the field of bioaerosols. He recently discussed the potential link between biosolids and staphylococcus aureus (staph aureus) and said: "Although many bioaerosol samples have been taken within two meters of land application sites, no staph aureus was ever detected in the bioaerosol samples. Furthermore, although as might be expected, staph aureus was found in raw sewage, it was never detected in a variety of biosolids samples collected and analyzed nationally from the southwest to the east coast."

In a prepared statement, Ken Kirk, the Executive Director of the Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies, in Washington, D.C. said: "Municipal wastewater treatment plant managers believe that land applying treated biosolids is a safe and environmentally beneficial use of an abundant natural resource." AMSA is a trade association representing nearly 300 publicly owned wastewater treatment facilities.

Tim Williams, Water Environment Federation (WEF) Director of Government Affairs, explained that "biosolids public education efforts are necessary to inform various audiences about the benefits of recycling and to enhance our nation's water quality."

Williams said that a communications void -- at times filled by misinformation posted on the world-wide web -- has raised public concerns and created political pressure for biosolids restrictions or bans. In a statement distributed by Synagro, Williams said that WEF believes in the benefits and safety of biosolids land applications and is committed to providing technical and educational support to the industry, elected and regulatory officials, and others in Florida.

Founded in 1928, the Water Environment Federation (WEF) is a not-for-profit technical and educational organization with members from varied disciplines who work toward the WEF vision of preservation and enhancement of the global water environment. The WEF network includes water quality professionals from 79 Member Associations in 32 countries.

According to O'Dette, "The EPA, which regulates land applications and actively encourages biosolids recycling, has determined that the process represents a 'negligible risk' to people, animals, and the environment. Whether driving a car, eating, breathing, swimming in the ocean, or just coming to this meeting in Tampa, we are all exposed to risks every day which are carefully evaluated and assessed by the scientific and regulatory community." For more than 20 years, O'Dette worked as a regulator with the State of Tennessee's Department of Environment and Conservation, where he had responsibility for overseeing the state's municipal biosolids program. "I am proud that I served and helped to protect the people of the State of Tennessee," he told the Florida audience.

Biosolids are a nutrient-rich product derived from treated sewage sludge in wastewater treatment plants which is applied as a soil amendment to agricultural land in approximately 25 to 30 Florida counties. The practice is approved, regulated, and monitored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

For additional information on the recycling of biosolids including the benefits, safety and environmental issues associated with land applications, contact: www.biosolids.com ; www.wef.org ; and www.epa.gov .