Water Environment Research Foundation

Press Release

For Release: May 13, 2003

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WERF, U.S. EPA to Host Biosolids Research Summit

The Water Environment Research Foundation will host a national Biosolids Research Summit July 28-30, 2003, that will involve public participation. By hosting this summit, WERF and co-sponsor U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will take the first steps in identifying needs and conducting research to address the controversy surrounding land application of biosolids.

The Summit will focus on a July 2002 report from the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences, and on other scientific issues related to biosolids. In response to one of the core recommendations of the NRC report, public participation will be a key part of the Summit. The Summit will bring together a wide variety of stakeholders—including critics of the biosolids industry—to create a research agenda that addresses questions about the land application of biosolids.

Biosolids are the organic matter that remains at the end of the wastewater treatment process after being broken down by bacteria and other organisms. An estimated 6.9 million tons of biosolids were generated in 1998, about 41 percent of which was applied to agricultural land as fertilizers and soil amendments, according to U.S. EPA. Although the NRC report found no documented scientific evidence that the part 503 rules have failed to protect public health, it did recommend that U.S. EPA update the scientific basis of regulations governing biosolids, improve knowledge of chemicals and pathogens, and evaluate concerns about health effects and exposure.

WERF expects that public input will ensure balanced and fair consideration of all perspectives regarding biosolids research. "While much has been done by WERF and others in the biosolids research arena, public participation and understanding of the science behind decisions are critical," said Glenn Reinhardt, executive director of WERF. "We want to help provide a thoughtful, inclusive, and educational response to the scientific questions raised by the NRC report—as well as other issues the public may bring to the Summit. By involving the public in setting the biosolids research agenda—and throughout the actual research process—we hope to develop more widely accepted and credible information for use by biosolids managers and policymakers.

WERF's biosolids research includes more than 40 projects valued at more than $18 million.

The Biosolids Research Summit will identify and prioritize biosolids research for the next five or more years, with the aim of ensuring that sewage sludge and biosolids management practices protect public health and the environment. The summit will focus on research needs, as opposed to policy. The multi-day workshop will include 45-60 invited attendees, including representatives

from state and federal agencies, academia, wastewater facilities, biosolids management companies, conservation groups, and interested citizens.

"Those who study public policy conflicts—like biosolids/sewage sludge management—have found that, rather than engaging in 'dueling science,' it is more productive for both sides to work together on the science," said Ned Beecher, a researcher on a WERF project on biosolids public perception. "Together, the two sides will determine research needs and establish a research process that is credible for everyone."

WERF has formed a steering committee of five individuals to define the goals of the Summit and to provide oversight to ensure balance, objectivity, focus on scientific issues, and the accomplishment of goals. The steering committee will also help develop mechanisms for implementing the resulting research agenda. The committee members include Robert Olexsey, Ph.D., U.S. EPA (NRMRL); James Stahl, WERF board member, Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts; Anthony Pilawski, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection; Joan Rose, Ph.D., Michigan State University; and Ellen Harrison, Cornell Waste Management Institute.

"WERF is pioneering an opportunity for constructive dialogue about research needs and appears to be taking seriously the concerns we have," said Harrison, who has raised concerns about the safety of biosolids recycling, of the Biosolids Research Summit. "I commend them for that and I hope the Summit will lead to more comprehensive research that includes greater focus on our concerns. Many concerned citizens fear that this effort is no more than PR and fear being 'co-opted.' It will be critical to see the extent to which WERF comes through on really listening to and implementing recommendations."

WERF has recently conducted several research projects aimed at understanding how to effectively work with the public, and use the public as a resource for improving decisions, developing public support, and ensuring cost-efficient public initiatives in biosolids, water reuse, and environmental management. The public partnering process is designed to improve relationships with the community through building trust and demonstrating fairness, opening channels for two-way communication, providing objective information, and developing motivation and commitment to the partnering process. WERF is applying these concepts to its own research processes. The Biosolids Research Summit will serve as an initial pilot test of WERF's efforts to effectively partner with the public.

Stahl notes: "Bringing meaningful public input and participation into the scientific research process is a challenge. It may mean some changes in how researchers go about their business, including learning how to develop and implement protocols that include stakeholder and public participation. This process will require patience and a willingness to work toward a research standard that is responsive to the needs of the public, as well as to the needs of the water quality field."

For More Information

In addition to the invited participants, interested observers will have an opportunity to attend and to provide comments at this summer's Biosolids Research Summit. Due to space limitations, the number of observers will be limited. Information on how to register as an observer will be available on the WERF website at http://www.werf.org on June 2, 2003.

For the full text of the NRC report, Biosolids Applied to Land: Advancing Standards and Practices (July 2002), go to http://books.nap.edu/books/0309084865/html/index.html.

For more information and regular updates on the Summit or for more on WERF's work in public partnering, go to http://www.werf.org/.

WERF is dedicated to advancing science and technology that addresses water quality issues as they impact water resources, the atmosphere, the land, and quality of life. In carrying out its mission, WERF funds, oversees, and publishes research targeted at addressing specific scientific issues related to wastewater treatment, including such topics as sludge and biosolids management. Beginning this year, it is appropriating 3 percent to 6 percent of its annual research budget toward new public partnering initiatives.

The Water Environment Research Foundation, a not-for-profit organization affiliated with the Water Environment Federation, addresses water quality issues with a commitment to environmental protection, economic conservancy, and enhanced quality of life. WERF Subscribers consist of wastewater utilities representing more than 60% of the U.S. sewered population and corporations sharing concerns for water quality issues.

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