

4-19-13 Sludge? You be the judge.

From the old movies we learned that cows were branded so that their ownership is identified in an attempt to discourage theft. Today, most everything is branded, even if you are not aware of it and it is to promote sales, rather than to prevent theft. In fact, branding is a specialty occupation going beyond graphic design and public relations; the branding consultant designs a look and a concept for the product. Branding is now so important and so universal, that even sewage sludge has been branded. It is no longer just poop; it is biosolids. Doesn't that make it more palatable?

And palatable is what we need it to be, for sewage sludge is being spread on some farms as you would spread compost. The difference is that traditional compost is derived from plants such as grass cuttings and vegetable food scraps, broken down from heat and digested from worms, resulting in a soil-like substance containing nutrients available for your garden. Even with that homemade vermiculture method, the compost is as good as what you fed it. Did your grass clippings have fertilizer? What kind? Did it have phosphate for root growth? The phosphate won't "break-down"; it is an element. It is what it is. If your yard is organic, you can produce high quality, safe compost. If you are not interested in marketing it to the public, you don't need to brand it, just spread it and enjoy watching your garden grow!

On the other hand, there is the fact of sewage sludge, or biosolids, as the solid end-product of the sewerage treatment plant, (with effluent being the liquid). While water treatment plants have sludge containing things like iron and manganese, the sludge from sewerage treatment plants contain everything produced by the human gut, such as the bacteria *E. coli* and everything used by humans at the sink and dumped down the toilet: medicines, hormones, and the oh-so-popular disinfectants.

It is easier to kill the bacteria than rid the sludge of chemicals. The sludge testing as safe from *E. coli* (or other indicator pathogens such as *Salmonella*) becomes Class A sludge. The stuff still containing those indicator pathogens become Class B sludge. Have you noticed what they have in common? They both have the chemicals. So, there are rules for that, too. It is not safe to be spreading or breathing or eating such chemicals as cadmium, molybdenum, thallium or triclosan. The sludge is tested for some chemicals (but not all) such as cadmium and molybdenum and the sludge is then permitted through our Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) with certain requirements, such as where it can or cannot be used and how it must be labeled.

Who is watching, though? Once the permit is in place, people are expected to follow the law. Certainly there are consequences for non-compliance with the law. This stuff is a hot

commodity, though. The treatment plants producing it need to get rid of it. They even pay people to take it. That is a mighty big temptation for people who own a lot of land and figure it is probably okay to dump or spread this stuff. In fact, why not make it even better by mixing it in with manure and leaves and call it compost? I am not saying this is happening locally. I am just saying it must be tempting.....

Some users of sewage sludge, aka, biosolids, were persuaded to use this product as a safe one many years ago. Check out the story of Andy McElmurray. You can read his heartbreaking testimony to the US Senate from 2008 where he tells his story of the failure of his three generation dairy farm as a result of the heavy metals in the sewage sludge spread on his farm. He is grateful to Judge Anthony Alaimo who “did what no one expected. He spent weeks methodically and meticulously combing through court proceedings and mountains of related testimony and exhibits in our cattle cases, and in Dr. David Lewis’ Labor Department case as well, until he pieced the puzzle together. Judge Alaimo ruled that Augusta’s reports, which Brobst used in the UGA study and the Department of Agriculture case, were “incomplete,” “unreliable,” “fudged,” “fabricated,” and, in some cases, “invented.”

Our food chain is a continuous loop, farm to table and table to earth, earth to plant, plant to table. It should not include chemicals, heavy metals, or bacteria. Apparently, some people need another kind of chain, the ones that restrain and sometimes even the kind with a heavy ball on the end.

In the meantime, for your own family, keep life simple, don’t dump medicine or chemicals down the sink or toilet, compost your plant food scraps, love worms and keep your eyes open. When you see something of concern, make that call. Call your local board of health, call your representatives, call DEP and call the source of your concern, whether it is a sewerage treatment plant or wherever you see sludge being spread. Is sludge safe? You be the judge.

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