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Human waste raises concerns among farmers

JULIANA BARBASSA
Associated Press

WASCO, Calif. - A strong wind raises clouds of powdery gray dust, obscuring the road and sky around Larry Pearson's truck as he drives past piles of dried human waste.

The mounds are part of an import stream some would rather not have in Kern County, one of the nation's most productive farming regions. Southern California cities and counties truck about 450,000 tons of treated sewage waste each year to the county, where it dries in massive piles and then is spread on land that is used to grow crops for livestock. It is not spread on land that is used to grow foods for market.

"We've become their toilet," said Pearson as he surveyed a 1,280-acre sludge site about 15 miles from town.

Pearson, a councilman here, and some other residents say the waste fouls the air and endangers the quality of groundwater. Some farmers also fear the practice could hurt the reputation of crops grown on the fertile soils of the southern San Joaquin Valley.

Critics are supporting a bill in the state Legislature to stop the transport of human waste from California's urban counties to farming communities. The first hearing is set for Monday.

The Environmental Protection Agency decided in the early 1990s that spreading the nation's treated sewage waste over farmland was preferable to sending it out to sea or pouring it in landfills. Since then, urban centers have trucked their sewage to rural areas, where the waste primarily is used as fertilizer for animal feed crops.

Some farmers swear by the benefits of the waste, saying it can improve soil quality by turning nutrient-poor ground heavy with clay into arable farmland.

"If you look at the cycle of life, of the economy here, it makes sense," said Ben Lapadula, general manager of Honey Bucket Farms. The 6,000-acre operation has used biosolids - the byproduct of treating municipal wastewater - for 12 years to fertilize land that grows fiber and cattle feed.

"When you grow a crop and export it, you're taking nutrients out of the soil. This brings those nutrients back," Lapadula said.

Kern County's wide-open fields and its location, just across the Tehachapi Mountains from the Los Angeles basin, make it an attractive dumping ground. The county produces only about 2 percent of the state's total sewage waste, but its farms take about a third of the biosolids.

"This is a wealthy, industrial area dumping anything they want on a rural, poor county," said state Sen. Dean Florez, who sponsored the bill to forbid carting waste to farming towns.

But such legal barriers could create problems for the state's more populous counties. They have little available land for sludge operations and might have to contract with private companies for disposal, a more expensive proposition.

Still, some growers say Kern County's reputation is on the line - even though none of the sludge is used on fields that produce crops for the local grocery store. But consumers "might not want to buy from a county that's known for taking human waste," said Paul Giboney, a ranch agronomist.

Giboney and others also are concerned about the content of biosolids, which contain the waste from industrial sites, dry cleaners, morgues, hospitals and other businesses. Chemicals and heavy metals are as much of a concern, if not more so, than human waste, they say.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has cited concerns about biosolids adding to the ozone pollution that already makes the area one of the country's dirtiest air basins. Pollution comes in the form of emissions from the piles and the grit that is picked up and distributed by the valley's frequent winds.

And Green Acres, a disposal site in Kern County that gets about 250,000 tons of treated waste every year from Los Angeles, sits next to a massive underground aquifer that stores irrigation and drinking water for surrounding farms and homes.

The water usually lies 50 to 100 feet underground, but in wet years can rise to within 25 feet of the surface. The risk of the waste contaminating the water is real, said Lloyd Fryer, the senior water resources planner for the Kern County Water Agency.

"Of course we're concerned," Fryer said. "Once that water's contaminated, there's no treating it. It's gone."

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