

NEBRAMail *“essential news only...”*

April 14, 2008

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CALENDAR...

Associated Press Publishes Two Additional Biosolids Stories

Sunday, the Associated Press (AP) released two news stories relating to biosolids management (see links, below). They have begun to be printed in major and minor newspapers and related news websites around the country.

The authors of the stories are John Heilprin and Kevin Vineys. They had interviewed and videotaped people around the country over the past year, including EPA staff, Dr. Rufus Chaney of USDA, several wastewater treatment facility and biosolids program managers, researchers, staff of the Water Environment Association and regional biosolids groups (including Ned Beecher here at NEBRA), and concerned citizens. They have amassed a considerable volume of information. Those involved in biosolids management and policy were open and proud to share their work in managing this necessary by-product of wastewater treatment. However, most of the information and perspective they provided – which would have provided balance – has not appeared in the AP stories.

One of the new AP stories, by Heilprin and Vineys, discusses research and demonstration of the efficacy of biosolids compost to reduce the bioavailability of lead in lead-contaminated soils. USDA and others have conducted research on this topic and the science is well established: by stimulating resilient vegetative growth and binding soil lead (and other potentially harmful elements), biosolids reduce human exposure and risk. Heilprin and Vineys' AP story implies harm may have come from the applications of biosolids compost

aimed at reducing the risk of human exposure to lead in the urban environment.

The actual peer-reviewed research paper (Farfel et al., 2005) concluded: “This longitudinal pilot study shows that in situ amendment of lead-containing yard soil with Orgro [biosolids compost] is associated with a significant reduction in bioaccessible Pb fraction and the development of a healthy turfgrass cover at 1-year follow-up.” The treatment worked and risk was reduced. In response to Heilprin and Vineys’ implied concerns about ethics, Dr. Rufus Chaney, the USDA researcher participating in this study recently stated “I am comfortable that the issues of soil and housing Pb risks to the children were well disclosed to the participants; they were part of a community group working with Dr. Farfel to learn more about how to protect their children from Pb. Ethics review at JHU [Johns Hopkins] and HUD [U. S. Housing and Urban Development] approved the test.”

The same premise of using biosolids to reduce metal availability in soils has been used to create some of the most dramatic environmental success stories at superfund sites in Colorado, Idaho, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. In those locations, sites contaminated with heavy metals from mining activity, which have been barren for decades, have been revegetated using biosolids.

Neighbors, researchers, local groups, and public agencies involved in these projects have been pleased with the results.

The second new AP story is authored by Vineys alone. Its premise is “sludge makeup hard to know.” It provides a brief description of wastewater and biosolids treatment. It briefly raises a variety of commonly voiced concerns – but it does not include the fact that many of these concerns have been researched and addressed by U. S. EPA and others, such as radioactivity in biosolids (see <http://www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/biosolids/radioactivity.htm>).

It includes odd, selected quotes; for example, Murray McBride, a soil chemist at Cornell, is quoted discussing microbiology.

Vineys quotes Dr. Thomas Burke: “There are lots of things that make it through treatment plants.” Burke headed the 2002 National Academy of Sciences review of the science behind biosolids management. Vineys does not include the finding of that extensive scientific review, as noted, for example in Dr. Burke’s clarifying statement released two months after the 2002 report: “[W]e found no evidence of an urgent public health risk from exposure to land-applied biosolids, based on our review of the scientific literature. Currently, there are no studies documenting adverse health effects from land application of biosolids, even though land application has been practiced for years. But this

finding was tempered by the fact that few studies are available on human exposure to biosolids, and that, even when they are investigated locally, there are no means of tracking health allegations nationally.” Such research is currently being developed by WERF in cooperation with U. S. EPA and others.

The recent AP stories have not included the broad scientific understanding of the benefits of biosolids use on soils. They did not discuss the preponderance of results of the 30+ years of research on biosolids use on soils, the fact that an international conference reviewing the science has occurred every ten years (last in January 2004) with a general finding that this is an acceptable practice, and the fact that a previous National Academy of Sciences’ review of use of biosolids on food crops found “negligible risk” (NAS, 1996).

Many of those involved in biosolids management who were interviewed by Heilprin and Vineys have stated that they believe the journalists were significantly biased, from the beginning, against the use of biosolids as soil amendments and fertilizers.

Previously, on March 6th, Heilprin authored a story released by AP regarding a court decision in Georgia that ordered USDA to make payments to a farmer who alleged soil contamination from biosolids. EPA and others had previously reviewed this situation and rejected the farmer’s claim, but all of this information was not considered by the judge. On March 10, an AP story reviewed the developing issue of pharmaceuticals in drinking and surface waters. For further information on these earlier stories, see *NEBRAMail* of March 28, 2008 or contact the NEBRA office.

The most recent two AP stories can be found at:

“Sludge Fertilizer Program Spurs Concerns”

http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5gbpCMPX9_kRtYkL1Yv9-OzuVxFfQD90134J80

Here’s the version of the same story that the Boston Globe printed today, April 14th:

http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/04/14/sludge_tested_as_lead_protection_in_poor_areas/

“Sludge Makeup Hard to Know”

http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5hV2e_Mh-6MlkxKCmvP8fL6mEWOBwD9012T480

Here's the version of the same story that appears on the Tampa Bay Online website:

http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/S/SLUDGE_WHATS_IN_IT?SITE=FLTAM&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT

U. S. Senate Committee Hearings – April 15th

The U. S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, chaired by Sen. Barbara Boxer (CA), is scheduled to hold a hearing on “Pharmaceuticals in the Nation’s Water,” tomorrow, Tuesday, April 15th, at 3:00 pm EDT.

Witnesses include Ben Grumbles, EPA Assistant Administrator for Water, and Robert Hirsch, Associate Director for Water at the U. S. Geological Survey, as well as water quality specialists from the Natural Resources Defense Council and a public water agency.

See

http://epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Hearing&Hearing_ID=30641a14-802a-23ad-4b51-a10dd439793f

It is rumored that the same committee may hold a hearing in May regarding biosolids management.

CALENDAR

April 14 – 16, 2008: 24th Annual BioCycle West Coast Conference 2008, Town and Country Resort & Convention Center, San Diego, CA,
<https://www.jgpress.com/conferences1/conferences1.html>

May 11-15, 2008: Waste – The Social Context ‘08: Urban Issues and Solutions, Shaw Conference Center, Edmonton, AB,
<http://conference.ewmce.com:80/prothos/onware.x/conf/252/index.p?!=public=12011880912299=1=18241012&Conferene=252>

For more calendar listings: <http://www.nebiosolids.org/mission.html#Anchor-CALENDAR-30049>