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Mecklenburg residents, dairy farmers discuss use of fertilizer sludge

By Cara Hoffman
Special to The Journal

Chemically treated human and municipal waste from the Syracuse metro area containing unregulated heavy metals and PCBs is being spread on fields in Schuyler County by Bergen Farms in a cost-saving move that has local residents alarmed and looking for information.

But the product — sold under the name Earth Blends or N-Viro Soil and manufactured by Waste Stream Environmental, Inc., in Syracuse — may be as much of a mystery to the Bergens as it was to the crowd of concerned citizens who packed the Mecklenburg Fire House on Wednesday night for an informational meeting that the Community Dispute Resolution Center facilitated.

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Sitting in folding chairs in the chilly fire hall, wearing coats and caps, the group of more than 80 had concerns that ranged from odor, quality of life issues and impact on real estate values, to potential well, ground water and watershed contamination and long-term health effects on human and animals including cancer.

According to marketing materials on the N-Viro Web site, Earth Blends, which has a tagline of “mixtures of earthly good,” is used as a “bio-organic and mineral fertilizer with agricultural liming and nutrient values.”

Jim Bergen said his 2,200 head family-owned dairy operation is able to buy the product for \$7 a ton, and though it is only half as effective as lime for regulating the pH levels of crops, it beats the \$35 a ton the farm would pay for lime.

N-Viro goes through a number of treatment processes to neutralize E. coli and other pathogens before it becomes the dry product that is spread on crops. But pathogens are a small part of the equation as Murray McBride, director of Cornell's Waste Management Institute, explained to residents.

Treating the sludge does not eliminate heavy metals, such as arsenic, cadmium, lead, copper and mercury, or man-made chemicals such as PCBs, fire retardants and dioxin, which build up in the soil over time and bio-accumulate in crops and in the bodies of animals that eat those crops.

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McBride explained there are no EPA regulations regarding the use of these industrial and chemical pollutants in land application. The EPA did, however, make a statement in a 2000 report from its inspector general's office stating it "Cannot assure the public that current land application processes of sewage sludge are protective of human health and the environment."

The Bergens have been spreading N-Viro's sludge product on their fields in Odessa for 10 years. In October 2007 they purchased land in the Town of Hector on the southwest corner of Perry City Road and the intersections of routes 227 and 228. A month later they had spread 600 tons of the treated sludge on their fields.

Mark Ochs, CAFO planner for Bergen Farms, said that a great deal of scrutiny goes into planning how the product is spread and that there is a buffer of land that is not fertilized with the product between Bergen Farm's fields and other properties to prevent possible contamination from runoff. "There is a lot of oversight for these plans," Ochs said. "They are heavily science based."

"The last thing we want to do is go around polluting someone's water source," said Skip Bergen. But Bergen said he did not have all the answers about what the product contains.

"The problem is the EPA says it's OK to use this," said Bergen's brother Jim. "It shouldn't be up to us if it has PCBs in it." He said he knew the product contained some heavy metals but Wednesday's meeting was the first time he had ever heard the waste contained PCBs.

"We are not anti-farming," said Mecklenburg resident Harley Campbell. "We are against poor farming practices and poor regulations." Campbell said the farmers were led to believe what they were doing was all right and it wasn't. "We need to ask the Bergens as neighbors not to use (N-Viro)," he said.

Skip Bergen nodded thoughtfully at the question. "If people were really upset about it, I think that's something my brothers and I could sit down and talk about."

After the meeting Jim Bergen said discussing the use of the fertilizer was a likely scenario. "There's definitely concerns," he said.