

Farmers won't kill their livelihood

COLBORNE CHRONICLE

By Joyce Cassin Feb. 21/08
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The issue of spraying biosolids on farmlands has some people upset, but farmers say they are being good stewards of the land that furnishes their livelihoods.

Norham farmer Bill Honey says he spreads biosolids on his lands as part of good farm practice. He has been farming his property just east of Warkworth for over 30 years and says he knows farming and what's good for the land and what isn't.

"I use biosolids because I feel they're good for the land," said Mr. Honey. "If I co-operate with the (Ministry of the Environment) recommendations, it's a wonderful system and a good use

of resources."

He says the environment ministry does soil tests before recommending the quantity of biosolids to be used. One recommendation he received was that 6,000 gallons per acre be spread.

"It may sound like a lot, but it's equivalent to about one-quarter inch of rain," he said. "The MoE is pretty careful. They don't allow it to be spread on slopes or near watercourses. There are a lot of guidelines to follow."

He says livestock farms are known to have the best soils in

the agricultural industry, as 70 per cent of what is grown on the land and fed to the livestock goes back into the land.

"People without livestock are scrabbling for nutrients," he says.

"And there are a lot of nutrients in biosolids."

There is concern from a Warkworth citizens' group

that biosolids are contaminating their wells and making them and their animals ill, creating an unbearable stench, as well as destroying the farmlands of Ontario to the point that earthworms are dying.

Mr. Honey argues that he is a

no-till farmer, and no-till farmers depend on earthworms to do the job of the tiller, and he finds the earthworms are alive and well and doing their jobs.

"I am a good steward of the land," said Mr. Honey. "If I do anything detrimental to the land, I am hurting my own livelihood."

And as far as odour is concerned, Mr. Honey says pig manure is 10 times more malodorous than biosolids.

Asked if he was concerned with the possibility of pharmaceuticals or disease in the biosolids, he said he believes the environment ministry assurances that biosolids are safe if used

Third in a special investigative series on the spreading of biosolids on farm fields.

Continued on page 3

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according to guidelines.

"I also believe in the dilution factor," he said. "The biosolids are 97-per-cent water."

He says that when spread on the lands according to ministry guidelines and setbacks, the fertilizer is soaked up by the land right away, eliminating the possibility of run-off into streams and rivers, just like any fertilizer.

Myrna Simpson, assistant professor of environmental science, associate director of the Environmental NMR Centre, and Department of Physical and Environmental Sciences at the University of Toronto, says that over-applications of any manure will saturate the soil and create run-off, as the soil's ability to hold onto nutrients and chemicals is finite, but she agreed that if biosolids are applied properly, there should be very few, if any, issues with run-off.

Other farmers such as the McCanns in Codrington have used biosolids and Cathy McCann says they have had no problems with their applications and don't see any reason why they wouldn't use them again.

She said soil tests are done on a regular basis and nothing irregular has shown up, nor has anyone reported illnesses or any other complaints.

"Everything is very well managed," said Mrs. McCann.

Dexter Harder of Northumberland Grain says he doesn't use biosolids because he's in the fertilizer business and he doesn't want to create any problems for his livelihood.

"They (the environment ministry) say they guarantee what's in it, and it might be exactly what they're saying, but I'm not taking any chances," said Mr. Harder. "I don't want problems with the public."



Biosolids are spread on a Northumberland County farmer's field.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Mr. Harder says there are significant savings to farmers, as much as \$100 to \$250 an acre, by using the "free" biosolids on their croplands in addition to existing fertilizers.

"Farmers are suffering so they're doing what they have to, to hang in there," suggested Mrs. McCann.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture doesn't see any problems with the use of biosolids on agricultural lands.

"The MoE is doing testing and farmlands aren't getting overloads of nutrients," said Lyle Gallagher, president of

Continued from page 1

Northumberland Federation of Agriculture (NFA). "Walkerton was run-off into the wells but the (environment ministry) takes surface water into account (in its guidelines)."

He says the use of human waste as fertilizer is much the same as using manure from any other animal.

"I do believe they are completing the cycle of life, unlike that of dumping them into landfills," said Mr. Gallagher. "We all eat food, and our excrement has nutrients."

He says biosolids are good fertilizer and save farmers the expense of buying commercial fertilizer. He expects fertilizer for an acre of corn this year to be between \$100 and \$120, and biosolids can replace approximately two-thirds of that, saving a farmer between \$67 and \$80 an acre.

Mr. Gallagher says he doesn't use biosolids, and has never applied to the MoE to see if he qualifies, not because there is anything wrong with it, but because he's concerned about what his neighbours would think.

He says that some farmers are dead set against the use of biosolids because they worry it may contain pharmaceuticals,

disease and bacteria, but they all understand why others use them, so it hasn't been a big issue at the NFA level.

"We have to believe that some of our regulatory agencies are doing their jobs," said Mr. Gallagher.

"In general, we're using the best information and technology we have today, but research hasn't ended," said Northumberland-Quinte West MPP Lou Rinaldi. "The knowledge we have today shows this is an acceptable method. I don't think any government would do anything to harm its people and environment."