

OWASA may stop spraying sludge on farms

Sewage byproduct is used as fertilizer

By TAMMY GRUBB
tgrubb@newsobserver.com

CARRBORO The Orange Water and Sewer Authority's board of directors will consider ending a program that has sprayed treated sewage sludge on local farmland since 1977.

A draft report recommends OWASA remove the water from the sludge and send all the "dewatered biosolids" to the McGill com-

pany in Chatham County for composting. The company converts the biosolids into fertilizers and soil compost.

The change could save \$113,000 a year in mostly sludge program personnel but also some equipment costs, the report says.

It also could avoid the need for more land if future changes to federal rules affect how much sludge can be sprayed, the report says. Those rates now are based on the nitrogen content of the biosolids and how much nitrogen is required by the crops being sprayed.

The first part of a two-part draft Biosolids Management Report will be discussed at 6 p.m. Thursday in the OWASA Community Room, 400 Jones Ferry Road in Carrboro. The board could decide later this month. The second part of the report, due March 6, will offer short- and long-term solutions.

Sludge is a byproduct of treating human feces and other sewage waste. So-called biosolids are separated from water at the Mason Farm Wastewater Treatment Plant. The biosolids are treated with high temperatures in an oxy-

gen-deprived environment, and micro-organisms eat away at other, undesirable micro-organisms and bacteria in the biosolids.

The process produces methane, which is burned, and liquid biosolids, or sewage sludge. The sewage sludge is regularly tested for toxicity, trace metals, solids, nutrients and other materials. OWASA also tests for groundwater contamination near sludge fields.

OWASA treats 7.5 million gallons of residential sewage each day at Mason Farm and produced, from

SEE **SLUDGE**, PAGE 3A

Wednesday, January 7, 2015 **3A**

SLUDGE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

July 2013 to June 2014, a little over 3,029 tons of wet biosolids.

Half is sprayed on 1,087 acres of farmland in Orange, Chatham and Alamance counties, about 86 percent privately owned. OWASA owns another 153 acres of spray fields west of Orange Grove Road that could be used for any future spraying.

The other half is dried and sent to McGill, which contracted with OWASA in 2007 to compost about 28 percent of its biosolids. The New Hill plant is roughly 50 miles roundtrip and charges \$26 per wet ton. OWASA reported spraying 1,200 to 1,400 tons of sewage sludge on farmland in 2006.

Stopping the sewage sludge program is a good start, said Myra Dotson, founder of the Sewage Sludge Action Network.

But sending all the biosolids to McGill, she said, is just exporting the problem, because the compost and fertilizers produced still contain traces of heavy metals, bacteria and other toxic materials. Using it on lawns, gardens and playing fields will make more people sick, she said.

The Orange County-based group educates people about the dangers to public and environmental health of sewage sludge and the garden products produced from it, which

What's next?

The OWASA Board of Directors will discuss a draft Biosolids Management Report at 6 p.m. Thursday in the OWASA Community Room, 400 Jones Ferry Road in Carrboro.

Comments also can be sent to the board via email at boardmembers@owasa.org or by mail to 400 Jones Ferry Road, Carrboro, NC 27510.

European and some U.S. scientists have begun to recognize.

Those researchers argue the science behind federal Environmental Protection Agency rules is outdated, the National Institutes of Health reported in 2013, and residents living near sludge land have reported physical symptoms, including skin rashes and respiratory and gastrointestinal distress. More research was recommended in 2002, but the NIH reported last year that little has been done.

One alternative, Dotson said, is disposing of biosolids in an incinerator equipped with air scrubbers. Modern systems also combine the sludge with sawdust to create pellets or gas that can then be burned to produce energy.

She and others plan to bring their ideas — which they've shared with OWASA before — to Thursday's meeting.

Grubb: 919-932-8746

Jan. 7, 2
News + Observ.