

Protecting What's Precious: New York Must Halt the Use of Toxic Biosolids Now

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388 words

For years, “biosolids” have been marketed as a green alternative to commercial fertilizer. But every time this contaminated sludge is spread on our farms and parkland, it puts our water, food, and land at risk. And here in Western New York, we’ve had enough.

The Inter-County Association of Western New York — representing 19 counties and 3 million people — recently called for a five-year moratorium on land-applying sewage sludge. From Buffalo and Lockport to Ithaca and Seneca Falls, our counties are saying clearly: our land is not a dumping ground for toxic waste.

Sewage sludge is what remains after household and industrial wastewater is treated. It contains PFAS — “forever chemicals” that accumulate in our bodies — as well as pharmaceuticals, microplastics, and pathogens. In Steuben County, which I represent, independent groundwater testing near sludge-treated fields showed PFAS levels up to nine times higher than elsewhere. Some samples exceeded state and federal guidelines, and residents were never informed their drinking water was being compromised.

That’s why Thurston and Cameron, two towns I will proudly represent in the County Legislature, acted to ban sludge spreading. We’ve seen what happens when communities don’t: in New Scotland, contaminated fields contributed to discolored tap water filled with E. coli and coliform bacteria. In Bethlehem, officials weren’t even told sludge was spread near the Vly Creek Reservoir — a key drinking water source — until after contamination had occurred.

Local action is not enough. Maine discovered widespread PFAS contamination caused by sludge and enacted a statewide ban, shut down contaminated farms, and created financial support for impacted farmers. New York must follow suit.

So 19 Western New York counties have joined Albany County in supporting Senator Harckham’s S5759 and Assemblymember Kelles’ A6192. These bills would pause sludge spreading for five years, require groundwater and soil testing, create a PFAS Agricultural Response Fund, and establish a biosolids task force to identify safer disposal methods.

Companies that profit from spreading sludge call it “recycling.” But if these materials are too toxic for landfills without containment, they’re too toxic for our soil, our crops, and our drinking water.

I urge Governor Hochul and the New York State Legislature to pass S5759 and A6192. Protect our farmland. Protect our water. Protect our children. New Yorkers deserve nothing less.

Our communities are not experiments. Let’s safeguard what’s irreplaceable — before it’s too late.