

From: **Citizens for Sludge-Free Land**

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To: **NPR** 1111 North Capitol Street, NE Washington DC 20002. Cc: thesalt@npr.org

Re: **Growing food on land treated with sewage sludge**

January 28, 2014

NPR's Eliza Barclay's January 21 article, **Whole Foods Bans Produce Grown with Sludge. But Who Wins?**(1) advocates using treated municipal sewage sludge (biosolids) to grow our food. Barclay's article misrepresents the scientific basis of this practice, cites only industry-friendly sources, and in many other ways deceives NPR readers. Her article should be retracted.

Contrary to Barclay's claim, Whole Foods Market's decision is based on a growing body of recent credible research questioning the benefits, sustainability, and safety of using sludge as fertilizer. The nation's highest "Science Court", the National Academy of Sciences, as well as the internationally renowned Cornell Waste Management Institute (CWMI) plus a growing number of other experts have warned that the current regulations that govern this practice are based on outdated science and on deeply flawed risk assessment models. In 1997 CWMI soil scientists, who have researched land application of biosolids since 1980, concluded that the current rules do not protect human health, agriculture, or the environment(2). In 2003, after he learned about the second PA sludge-exposure death, former EPA Deputy Administrator, Paul Gilman, announced on CBS evening news that his agency could no longer say that sludge use was safe and that the issue needed to be revisited(3). A 2002 EPA Inspector Memo warned EPA's Office of Water that it had not done the basic research to assess the risks of land application. A 2008 editorial in *Nature* called the US biosolids program "an institutional failure spanning more than three decades."

Yet despite more recent research confirming CWMI's conclusion, and despite the increasing complexity of the nation's waste stream, with more pollutants entering sewage treatment plants every year, EPA has not revised its twenty-year old regulations.

Many hundreds of sludge-exposed rural residents in 36 states and Canada have reported tainted wells, damaged crops, live-stock deaths, and identical health symptoms after biosolids was spread next to their schools, homes, playgrounds, and churches. Award-winning microbiologist, David Lewis, formerly a high ranking EPA research scientist, has documented some of these cases in the peer reviewed scientific literature. Lewis's team's conclusions have been confirmed by a later exposure study. Two prize-winning GA dairy herds were wiped out after animals sickened and died from ingesting forage grown on land repeatedly treated with sludge. A jury ruled that ingesting sludge-contaminated forage sickened and killed these animals. As a result of these incidents, close to a hundred environmental, farm, and health organizations, oppose using sludge on agricultural land.. Here is a partial list of these organizations (4). No major food processing company accepts produce that is grown on land treated with biosolids (5).

Rebecah Wilce with the Food Rights Network provided Barclay with accurate and recent data; yet the author totally ignored this information, relying instead exclusively on industry-friendly sources. One of her sources who is paid by the sludge lobby to promote the use of biosolids, has repeatedly tried to discredit and silence critics. Another of Barclay's sources, has called critics "eco-terrorists" and works with Rufus Chaney, a USDA agronomist, who wrote the current regulations, continues to defend them, and has tried to prevent the publication of research that documents problems linked to biosolids use.

Another one of Barclay's sources, Chris Peot, who runs a sewage treatment plant in D.C., assures readers that the only potential chemical of concern in sludge might be flame retardants, and that otherwise what his facility produces is clean. "Clean"? The Federal Clean Water Act defines sludge as a pollutant. Thousands of synthetic industrial chemical compounds are discharged into sewers every day. As most of them are removed from the waste water, they end up in biosolids. Every entity connected to a sewer, every hospital, every industry, every metal plating shop, every dry cleaning establishment, every lab is permitted to discharge any amount of hazardous waste into sewage treatment plants, as long as these entities comply with a one-time annual notification requirement. For a partial list of these pollutants, see www.sludgefacts.org/Ref125.pdf Sewage treatment plants cannot treat or remove most of these contaminants, some of which are persistent and enter the food chain.

Biosolids also contains harmful pathogens that are not destroyed by treatment. In fact, they re-grow when sludge is stockpiled, especially in cool and moist climates. Worse, new studies indicate that sewage treatment plants actually produce antibiotic resistant pathogens, and that these facilities are, in fact, breeding grounds for superbugs, ending up in biosolids and soils and transferring their resistance to other organisms. Temperatures in current treatment plants are not high enough to destroy prions. Prions have been detected at high concentrations in land-applied sewage sludges and can enter the food chain. Does NPR really agree with Barclay's primary source that "trace" amounts of priority pollutants in biosolids, measured in parts per million are no problem? Or that the nation's agricultural soil should be used as a "treatment facility" of our toxic industrial waste? (6)

In conclusion, land applied sewage sludge generated in large industrialized urban centers is probably the most pollutant-rich material of the 21st century. This complex and unpredictable mixtures of industrial and human waste does not belong on the land where we grow our food.

Barclay's article is not just controversial or slanted, inviting honest debate. It is totally deceptive. A disservice to your readers, and not worthy of NPR's mission.

(1) <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/01/17/263370333/whole-foods-bans-produce-grown-with-sludge-but-who-wins>

(2) <http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/case.pdf>

(3) <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/10/29/eveningnews/main580816.shtml>

(4) **The Sierra Club, the Rodale Institute, the National Farmers Union, the Environmental Working Group, the Center for Food Safety, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Friends of the Earth, International Center for Technology Assessment, the Resource Institute for Low Entropy Systems, United Mine Workers of America, Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, Environmental Research Foundation, Center for Media and Democracy, Organic Consumers Association, Science and Environmental Health Network, Center for Biology of Natural Systems, Kern Food Growers Against Sewage Sludge, Sustainable Bronx, Pennsylvania Environmental Network, Center for Sludge Information, United Sludge-Free Alliance, Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, the Precautionary Group, Sewage Sludge Action Network, Citizens for Sludge-Free Land.**

(5) **Allen Canning Company, Siloam Springs, Arkansas, Campbell Soup Company, Comstock Michigan Fruit Division, Dean Foods Vegetable Company, Green Bay WI (Birds Eye products) Del Monte, Heinz, National Food Processors Association, Nestle USA, Perez Packing, Firebaugh CA, Progresso (Pillsbury, Green Giant, Totinos, Jenos, Haagen Dazs), Martha White, Old El Paso, Seabrook Farms, Stanislaus County Farm Bureau, Tri Valley Growers, Van Den Berch Food Co, Vermont Family Farms Milk, Western Growers.**

(6) **Ned Beecher; one of 216 comments about Barclay's article.**