

E. Washington farm receives scaled-down biosolids permit

Ecology: No risk to health, environment when applied properly

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

The Washington Department of Ecology has approved the scaled-down application of biosolids on an Eastern Washington farm after activists protested.

Ecology approved Fire Mountain Farms' request to apply treated solid waste on 158 acres at Rosman Farms near Davenport, Wash.

The farm's original application sought permission to apply biosolids on 1,045 acres.

"Those who opposed the recycling of this valuable resource could not present a single valid argument indicating that this was not an environmentally beneficial activity," Robert Thode, president of Fire Mountain Farms, said. "So they resorted to a campaign of harassment, intimidation and threats. It reached the point that the land owner could not justify continuing



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

Members of the Protect Mill Canyon Watershed group, including Jim Green, Morton Alexander and Deanne Burdine, protest a permit to apply biosolids on an Eastern Washington farm Sept. 6 outside the state Department of Ecology office in Spokane. The group is claiming victory after the farmer reduced the acreage in his request, which the department has approved.

and dropped most of the farm from the proposal."

The Protect Mill Canyon Watershed group campaigned against the proposal in September, claiming it is impossible to know what is in the biosolids applied to the soil. Biosolids are commonly applied as fertilizer on farm land.

The committee includes members of Tolstoy Farms, which describes itself as an "intentional community" that grows organic produce on 4 acres and has a community

supported agriculture program, according to its website. In a press release, the group called the permit for reduced acreage a victory and credited "one-on-one negotiations between neighbors" with the farmer.

"The farmer ultimately decided that being a good neighbor was most important and agreed to withdraw from applying sludge close to Mill Canyon," the press release states.

With the approved permit, the nearest application of

biosolids will be more than 5 miles from the canyon, the press release states.

The group advocates a statewide moratorium on future biosolid permits.

A demonstration outside Ecology offices in Spokane last September did not impact the department's decision, said Brook Beeler, communications manager for Ecology.

"As long as biosolids are applied according to state and federal rules there is no threat to people and the environment," Beeler said. "It's our responsibility to ensure that Fire Mountain Farms complies with the requirements for safely applying biosolids."

Thode said his company is pursuing other options for biosolid application in the region. He said the public is not getting the true message about biosolids as an environmentally beneficial activity.

"It is truly a sad day for all agriculture when vigilantes are allowed to dictate farming practices," Thode said. "These types of issues should be confronted by a unified farming community or they will pick off one at a time."



Courtesy of Melodie Putnam/OSU

A leafy gall caused by the rhodococcus bacteria grows at the base of a butterfly bush.

OSU researchers developing tools to track harmful bacteria

Rhodococcus can cause unusual growth in ornamentals

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

The change can happen overnight, a mutation at the microscopic level, causing otherwise healthy ornamentals such as daisies and chrysanthemums to sprout damaging growth defects.

Rhodococcus, a type of soil-borne bacteria, is to blame for the deformity, infecting mostly herbaceous perennial plants with leafy galls, a disease that burdens Oregon's \$900 million greenhouse and nursery industry.

But not all strains of rhodococcus are harmful, according to researchers with Oregon State University. In fact, some may be beneficial, helping to grow more root hairs and improve uptake of water and nutrients.

The transformation of rhodococcus from good to bad lies in tiny DNA molecules known as plasmids, according to OSU. Researchers are now developing tools that will allow nurseries to identify bad rhodococcus before it spreads, avoiding potentially serious losses.

Jeff Chang, associate professor in the Department of Botany and Plant Pathology, led a recent study published Dec. 12 in the journal eLife. He said plasmids are the switch that turns rhodococcus from beneficial to completely pathogenic, morphing from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde.

"You can see how very subtle changes in a bacterial genome can change it from being benign to pathogenic," Chang said. "The ease to which this transition occurs is rather unusual, and it presents

a difficult challenge for nurseries."

Nurseries are the leader in Oregon agricultural production, with most sales going out of state. Not only are ornamental plants produced for aesthetics and beauty, but they also need to be free of disease before they ship out, Chang said. Otherwise, they must be destroyed.

It was Alexandra Weisberg, a postdoctoral fellow in Chang's lab, who observed plasmids moving between strains of rhodococcus. Plasmids are molecules within bacterial DNA that replicate independently of the cell cycle, giving bacteria new advantages in their environment.

Chang said the intensive hands-on management of plants in nurseries may encourage the rhodococcus bacteria to get together and transfer the disease-causing plasmid.

"So obviously, the key is to keep the nursery site as clean as possible," he said. "They could have rhodococcus as a persistent pathogen-causing organism on their site."

Vigilance is crucial, Chang said, since there is no spray known to control rhodococcus. OSU is working to develop a test kit, he added, that will help nursery managers distinguish between the good and bad bacteria and avoid destroying non-infected plants.

The product is still under development, though Chang described it as resembling a pregnancy stick test.

"The hard part is extracting DNA from the bacteria," he said.

Melodie Putnam, director and chief diagnostician at the OSU Plant Clinic, said the difference between benign and harmful rhodococcus has led to some misdiagnoses of pistachio trees, which were submitted to the university in 2014.

The trees were short and bushy, had knobby stems and would not properly graft, Putnam said. After testing, however, she found only non-pathogenic rhodococcus in the samples.

She hopes the university's study and testing tools will help growers to accurately identify and diagnose rhodococcus themselves.

"Education is the primary thing that I'm hoping for," Putnam said.

The project may also lead to better management tools for the harmful strains of rhodococcus, she added.

"Right now, there aren't any good options," she said.

Chang said his lab has pre-applied to the USDA for additional funding to continue the research, and possibly figure out what conditions cause plasmids to transfer in the first place.

"This is a huge problem in the nursery industry, which produces plants for their beauty and aesthetic values," he said.

NCBA takes stock of progress in 2017

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

It was a busy year for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, working with the Trump administration and Congress to further the interest of cattle producers.

It's been "a year that's provided a lot of opportunity for us, a significant number of wins, but at the same time many challenges we've had to think through and will continue to think through," Colin Woodall, NCBA senior vice president of government affairs, said during a year-end webinar.

Those wins include gaining access for U.S. beef to China, relief from some onerous regulations and progress on still other unresolved issues, he and other staff members said.

"One of the bright spots in our relationship with the Trump administration has been our improved relationship with Environmental Protection Agency. For the first time in many years and spanning several different administrations, we find ourselves with an opportunity to work with the EPA rather than just always working against the EPA," Woodall said.

Scott Yager, NCBA environmental counsel, said the cattle industry has a lot



Colin Woodall

Yager said.

Nowhere has that been clearer than with the Waters of the United States rule, which went way beyond federal jurisdiction in claiming water and land features for regulation. The rule is now on the path to repeal, he said.

The next step will be a new WOTUS definition, and NCBA has been fully involved in the effort to develop replacement language, he said.

"Keep in mind there has to be a jurisdictional limit on where the Clean Water Act applies," he said.

NCBA also scored a win in getting the Bureau of Land Management's Planning 2.0 rule repealed using the Congressional Review Act.

The rule would have radically changed the way BLM does its land use planning, removing local input from the process, said Ethan Lane, executive director of the Public Lands Council and

to be happy about with the administration's position on environmental issues.

Scott Pruitt, the EPA administrator, "is all about getting industry stakeholders in the room and hearing their perspective on issues,"

NCBA federal lands.

Efforts to prevent BLM from curtailing grazing in its land use planning amendments for greater sage grouse have also paid off, with both BLM and the Forest Service working on new planning processes, he said.

There's also been progress on fighting the abuses of the Antiquities Act, with President Trump reducing the size of national monuments by 2 million acres thus far. Those monuments reduce grazing and destroy local economies, and more designation reductions and restrictions are expected, he said.

NCBA and PLC will continue to focus on changing the way the Antiquities Act works to prevent future designations without local input, he said.

There is also good movement on comprehensive modernization of the Endangered Species Act. NCBA and PLC have been working with the Western Governors' Association, which has developed bipartisan recommendations to reform ESA and there's positive feedback on the recommendations from Congress, he said.

Other wins in 2017 include securing a 90-day waiver from the Department of Transportation on electronic log devices for livestock haulers, an issue NCBA will continue to pursue.

EU-Japan trade deal worrisome for U.S. farm exports

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**
Capital Press

A recent trade deal between the European Union and Japan will have mixed impacts for American farm exports but is part of a discouraging trend, experts say.

Some European products, such as cheese, are more likely to win market share in Japan from U.S. producers than others, such as wheat, according to trade specialists from several agricultural organizations.

Overall, though, the agreement is another example of foreign countries im-

proving their trade relationships while the U.S. is left behind, they said.

"If our competitors have a much lower tariff rate, that's not a level playing field," said Kent Bacus, international trade director for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

Tariffs will be eliminated in Japan over 15 years for certain EU cheeses — including cheddar, parmesan and gouda — while volume limits will be raised and eventually eliminated for other cheeses, such as mozzarella, brie and feta, according to a USDA analysis.

"Europeans are going to take us to the

cleaners if we do not catch up and catch up soon," said Jaime Castaneda, senior vice president of trade policy for the U.S. Dairy Export Council.

U.S. dairy product exports to Japan most recently peaked in 2014, with more than \$400 million worth of goods shipped, but fell to about \$200 million last year, according to USDA.

It will be extremely difficult for U.S. producers to compete in Japan if they're saddled with tariffs of up to 40 percent on some cheeses while the Europeans pay progressively lower rates and ultimately none, Castaneda said.




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