



CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION of SANITATION AGENCIES

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Via Electronic Mail

Date: May 16, 2008

To: Erik Olson, Deputy Staff Director and General Counsel,
Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works
Grant Cope, Majority Counsel, Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works

From: Greg Kester – CASA Biosolids Program Manager

Subject: Associated Press article regarding biosolids compost study in Baltimore

I wanted to provide you with a succinct summary of the facts related to the recent Associated Press (AP) story on biosolids compost. Since this article appeared on April 13th there have been numerous reactions and follow-up articles and editorials. If you have not seen them all and are interested, please let me know and I will forward them to you. In this memo, I briefly summarize the project, the AP story and reaction to it, provide some of my perspectives, and follow-up activities that are taking place.

The Study:

A research project funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and implemented through Johns Hopkins School of Public Health (JHU) and with assistance from Rufus Chaney (USDA), was carried out in a poor African-American neighborhood in Baltimore. An ethics review was conducted by JHU and HUD approved the study. A lab study preceded the field test and those results formed the basis for the field test. The area soil was highly contaminated with lead from non-industrial sources. Grass would not grow so children were subject to dangerous levels of lead every time they played outdoors. Neither the City of Baltimore, the State of Maryland, or the Federal Government had funds or a program in place to remove the contaminated soil, since it did not originate from an industrial source. In response, this project was formulated which sought to immobilize and reduce the bio-availability of the lead by applying a commercially sold high iron and phosphorus biosolids compost to the soil. The Exceptional Quality biosolids compost (Orgro) was produced using the City of Baltimore's biosolids, and composted with woodchips and sawdust. Orgro was, and is, sold commercially at Home Depot and many other outlets for unrestricted use on gardens and lawns. The research demonstrated significant reduction in bioaccessible lead (64 – 67%). The project also succeeded in establishing excellent grass coverage so as to minimize the direct ingestion of lead through soil. A similar project was conducted in East St. Louis, with a team that included Dr. Chaney, Dr. Jim Ryan (EPA) and Dr. Sally Brown (Univ. of Washington) and found similarly positive results. It should be noted that both studies were intended to test lead soil levels and to determine the effectiveness of biosolids compost to reduce the bioavailability of soil lead. They were not intended to test blood levels in individuals and did not do so.

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The articles:

The April 13th AP story sensationalized these studies and spun them into an environmental justice issue. The story claimed that poor African-Americans were victimized by the researchers and states that the Maryland Court of Appeals likened a previous study by the lead JHU researcher to the "...Nazi-medical research on concentration camp prisoners...U.S. government's 40 year Tuskegee study that denied treatment for syphilis to black men....and Japan's use of "plague bombs" in World War II...". The president of the Maryland chapter of the NAACP has requested the Attorney General to review this research to conclude whether it was prejudicial and racist.

Perspectives:

We urge you to focus on the facts and scientific findings of these studies. Elevated urban lead is a huge problem across the nation. There is no funding source or cost effective solution to this problem. The standard solution at EPA Superfund sites has been excavation and replacement of the soil. That is not feasible for the vast tracts of urban soils that are lead contaminated. Further, it is important to note that the children were living in hazardous conditions and that no public agency would have taken any remedial action. In carrying out these studies, scientists and universities took it upon themselves to scientifically determine if application of compost would be a viable approach to respond to a critical public health need. Through the power of science and the beneficial properties of biosolids, the families involved in the research were able to have their living environment improved and significantly reduced their exposure to unsafe levels of lead.

Follow-up activity:

We understand that the senior editorial staff of the Associated Press has assigned a new journalist to write a follow-up article and that the original author has been reassigned. Senior staff were "dissatisfied" with the original reporter's coverage.