Re: Concerns regarding biosolids management

Dear Mr. Santabarbara,

I am writing to offer information regarding the management of wastewater and wastewater solids (sewage sludge) and the production of biosolids (treated solids that meet strict state and federal standards for recycling to soils). Our organization, NEBRA, is the Northeast’s non-profit professional membership group for biosolids. We advance best practices and understanding of the recycling of biosolids and other residuals. Several of our members reside and/or work extensively in New York.

While the timing of this letter is in response to the concerns you have expressed amidst the debate about the proposed Lystek biosolids production facility at the Glen Canal View Business Park, this letter is not specifically about that project.¹

But rather than focus on what is now past (Lystek has withdrawn its proposal), this letter aims to open dialogue with you and other community leaders regarding the management of wastewater solids. As you, as an engineer, know, this activity is not optional. Sewage sludge is a necessary byproduct of essential wastewater treatment. It can be incinerated, landfilled, or – if properly treated and tested – safely used on land. Each option comes with real costs to wastewater treatment plant owners – municipalities and ratepayers. And each option has environmental impacts (human activities do). Generally, in most situations, recycling biosolids to soils is the best environmental (and, sometimes, best economic) option. But, as you have experienced, the concept of recycling a product that started as wastewater sometimes challenges social acceptance. Understandably, people have questions, and, in Glen, those questions were voiced vociferously by CALL, with the intent of just saying “no,” which is much easier than extended dialogue to understand the nuances of an important activity. We understand this. We have seen similar situations play out elsewhere. But we also believe it is imperative to work past the “yuck”

¹ However, regarding the Lystek project, I will note the following: Lystek is a long-time member in good standing of our non-profit professional association, and, across the U. S. and Canada, our profession recognizes Lystek for the highest quality services, exceptional community outreach, and integrity. It is unfortunate when an effective environmental solution (recycling biosolids for several communities) conducted by an exceptional company – the Lystek process is one of today’s best options for biosolids recycling – is dismissed.
factor and look hard at the science and the experience of thousands of successful biosolids recycling programs across the continent. And we would like to ensure that you and other community leaders understand biosolids and why we, as a society need to find ways to recycle them when we can.

More than 40 years of dedicated research, including two National Academy of Sciences reviews, support the recycling of biosolids to soils. Biosolids improve soil health and farm economics, increase crop yields, and sequester carbon (mitigating greenhouse gas emissions). As you have noted, they are an important part of generating renewable energy through anaerobic digestion. (Of course, the products of digestion – those biosolids – must be managed.) About 60% of the wastewater solids produced in the U. S. are recycled, mostly on farms, on a relatively small amount of land area (<1% of agronomic area). San Francisco, Seattle, Denver, Chicago, Boston, and numerous smaller communities in between, including in New York State, recycle their biosolids to soils. This is a highly-developed and highly-regulated practice. Please see “about biosolids” at https://www.nebiosolids.org/about-biosolids/ for more about the nationwide use of biosolids and the science underpinning the practice. And check out the “resources” area of our website for answers to a variety of common questions.

When can we meet by phone, webinar, or in person to discuss biosolids and address questions you may have? What do you suggest now for how we can work together soon, while there is this current public and media interest in wastewater and solids management in your district? Just saying “no” to wastewater solids management is not an option, and the community deserves to come away from this debate with improved understanding of the vital role wastewater treatment and solids management plays in the health and safety of every citizen. Your leadership on this can help. Now that there is no pending project, perhaps we can all finish this discussion with thoughtful review of the actual costs and benefits of biosolids recycling. Even rural communities that rely on septic systems need to be involved and understand that their septage is directly linked into the overall wastewater infrastructure. We must all be part of the solution.

We look forward to speaking with you.

Best regards,

[Signature]

Ned Beecher
Executive Director

cc.  John Thomas, Supervisor, Glen, NY
     Sally Rowland, P. E., Ph.D., NY Department of Environmental Conservation / Materials Management Div.

The North East Biosolids and Residuals Association (NEBRA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit professional association advancing the environmentally sound and publicly supported recycling of biosolids and other organic residuals in New England, New York, and eastern Canada. NEBRA membership includes the environmental professionals and organizations that produce, treat, test, consult on, and manage most of the region’s biosolids and other large volume recyclable organic residuals. NEBRA is funded by membership fees, donations, and project grants. Its Board of Directors are from MA, ME, NH, VT, and Nova Scotia. NEBRA’s financial statements and other information are open for public inspection during normal business hours. For more information: http://www.nebiosolids.org.