

Understanding Biosolids and Land Application

Our wastewater treatment facility plays a critical role in supporting a healthy and thriving community by protecting our most vital resource – water. But beyond providing this essential service, it is also an opportunity to recover valuable resources, reducing waste and supporting a more sustainable community.

Across the country, wastewater treatment plants like ours have a sustainable and profound relationship to agriculture: once we treat wastewater, we can convert the remaining highly treated product, called ‘biosolids,’ into a natural fertilizer used by farmers.

Biosolids provide a natural source of phosphorus, nitrogen, and micronutrients for crops in a way that is more sustainable than manufactured fertilizers. For decades, many farmers have relied on and benefited from the use of biosolids, a practice closely regulated by federal and state governments and endorsed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

In addition to returning valuable resources to our environment, the beneficial reuse of biosolids also reduces demand for the two other alternatives to managing biosolids — landfilling and incineration. Both alternatives have their own unique environmental challenges and capacity limitations.

Recently, EPA has begun reviewing its biosolids regulations because of PFAS, also known as “forever chemicals.” Although PFAS have been part of our world for more than 70 years, showing up in everything from clothes, carpets, cookware, cosmetics and more, it’s only recently that the public learned that prolonged exposure to PFAS could pose health risks.

In January 2025, EPA released a draft risk assessment looking at potential risks from certain PFAS in biosolids. This new assessment found that while there may be some risk from PFOA and PFOS in biosolids for a very narrow and specific segment of the population most likely to be exposed, there is no risk to the general public or the general food supply. The risk assessment is now out for public comment and EPA will decide whether to finalize it. If EPA determines that further regulation of biosolids due to PFAS is warranted, the Agency will then develop new regulations for biosolids management which utilities, farmers, and other entities will need to follow.

We are fully committed to protecting public health and the environment and will follow any new regulations related to PFAS. Any regulations must be grounded in sound science to ensure they are effective and make the best use of our community’s limited resources, because changing how we and our agricultural partners operate could be costly to implement. Currently, there is simply not enough scientific evidence or data that the

limited amount of PFAS in our biosolids poses enough risk to the average American to justify asking our customers to pay for major system improvements.

We also support strategies that start with the most logical and effective approach: addressing the source. Starting regulations with the companies that produce and profit from these chemicals is not only the most effective way to reduce PFAS pollution, but it is also the most equitable, as utilities had no role in creating or putting PFAS into the waste stream.

More broadly, we are concerned that instead of focusing first on source control and asking the manufacturers of these chemicals to develop a plan for restricting their use, the recent attention to PFAS and biosolids could instead lead to ill-informed regulations that make local communities bear the costs by regulating PFAS on the back end, once we've been exposed to PFAS through consumer products in our workplaces, homes, and bodies. It is critical that we focus on removing PFAS at the source before they enter our wastewater treatment systems.