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'Forever chemicals' in sewage sludge pose health risks — EPA

The findings could spur more states to ban the use of sewage sludge as fertilizer.



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Biosolids applied to a farm in Mitchells, Virginia, on June 6, 2007. An EPA assessment found that sewage sludge used as fertilizer contains "forever chemicals" that create human health risks. | Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP

GREENWIRE | Sewage sludge used as fertilizer across the U.S. may contain unsafe levels of "forever chemicals," posing risks to those who live near agricultural sites or consume crops they produce, according to a sweeping new federal report.

Released Tuesday, [the draft report](#) from EPA adds to growing concerns from scientists and environmentalists about the spread of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, in the environment. It could spur more states to limit or ban the use of sewage sludge as fertilizer, as Maine did in 2022 after farms that applied sludge became highly contaminated with PFAS.

Used in products like cookware, carpets, plastics and prescription drugs, PFAS are human-made chemicals that are extremely difficult to destroy. Versions of the substances have been linked to health problems and deadly diseases such as cancer.

With PFAS now present in the blood of most Americans, the chemicals can enter the waste stream through both municipal sewage and industrial waste. Traditional treatment processes at sewage treatment plants do not remove or destroy PFAS.

To that end, EPA's new report confirms that PFAS in wastewater accumulates in sewage sludge: the semisolid material left over after wastewater is processed. That sludge is routinely applied on land as fertilizer, a practice EPA has promoted for years as environmentally beneficial.

Now, for the first time, the agency said that people who live near or on farms where sludge is applied, as well as people who regularly eat food or drink water produced at those sites, may be exposed to two toxic types of PFAS.

In some select cases, the human health risks posed by sewage sludge containing those PFAS — PFOS and PFOA — are unacceptable “by several orders of magnitude,” the report said.

Known as a draft risk assessment, the report does not require action from companies that make products containing PFAS or from wastewater treatment plants. Still, the assessment is a first step toward a potential regulation to “manage” PFAS in sewage sludge, EPA said.

The risk assessment will be open for public comment before a final version is released, EPA said. It will not be finalized before the end of the Biden administration, and it's unclear what the incoming Trump administration will do.

The findings should nonetheless spur action from states to ban the use of sludge as fertilizer and to prevent companies from releasing PFAS to wastewater treatment plants, environmental advocates said.

“The EPA’s risk assessment underscores the devastating public health consequences caused by fertilizing food and feed crops with PFAS-contaminated sludge, especially for those living on or near farms,” Jared Hayes, senior policy analyst at the Environmental Working Group, said in a statement.

About 56 percent of the nation’s sewage sludge is applied on soil or land as fertilizer, the EPA report said. Other options for dealing with sludge include incinerating it or disposing of it in landfills, but those also come with risks to the environment and human health, the assessment found.

EPA suggested potential best practices for managing PFAS in wastewater and sludge. For example, wastewater treatment plants should do more to monitor for PFAS, the agency said. In addition, the operators of treatment plants can require companies sending waste to first treat for or remove the substances — a practice already in use by some facilities, EPA said.

“In some state programs, [treatment plants] with industrial sources have achieved a 98 percent reduction in PFOS sewage sludge concentrations through industrial pretreatment initiatives,” the report said.

Over 1,600 wastewater utilities currently have programs designed to limit the release of PFAS through treated waste, said Adam Krantz, CEO of the National Association of Clean Water Agencies. Still, it is the responsibility of manufacturers to prevent PFAS from entering the waste stream to begin with, Krantz said in a statement.

“Ultimately, the manufacturers of these chemicals must bear the responsibility and cost to remove these chemicals from their processes and our environment to further mitigate any potential public health risk,” he said.

Kyla Bennett, director of science policy at the nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, said EPA likely underestimated the risks posed by PFAS-laden sewage sludge.

She questioned EPA's assertion that most food produced in the U.S. "is not grown on fields where sewage sludge is land applied," as well as EPA's decision to only include

PFOA and PFOS in the assessment. There are thousands of versions of PFAS, and scientists believe that many of them pose similar human health risks.

"I'm glad that EPA is addressing this issue, but it is not enough. They need to look at more PFAS than PFOA and PFOS, and they need to fix some of their assumptions," Bennett said in an email.

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