Biosolids Benefit Farming and the Economy. Don’t Let Fear Upset the Balance.

For decades, wastewater treatment facilities like ours here in XXXX have been using residuals from our advanced wastewater treatment process to create a product called biosolids. Farmers in our community and beyond use these biosolids to fertilize their land and help support our nation’s agricultural economy. However, knee-jerk reactions to the potential risks posed by PFAS – frequently referred to as "forever chemicals" – could affect and alter the current beneficial processes that have been working well for years.

State and local governments across the country are proposing – and sometimes enacting – biosolids land application bans because of concerns related to PFAS Lawsuits claiming PFAS- tainted biosolids have killed livestock and livelihoods further vilify the practice of biosolids land application. These chemicals have been in our environment since the 1940s, but only recently has there been a movement to characterize biosolids as dangerous because of the presence of PFAS. Unfounded claims about PFAS in biosolids that do not consider actual exposure or risk levels could threaten the beneficial program for their use that has been in place for decades.

Biosolids provide farmers with a sustainable, cost-effective and domestic source of fertilizer. According to 2019 data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the majority of municipal biosolids generated in the U.S. are applied to the land as a soil additive. This widely used alternative to manufactured fertilizers is also economical for farmers, especially given today’s supply chain challenges and price increases on manufactured fertilizers due to inflation.

We understand – and share – the same concerns about PFAS that farmers and landowners who use municipal biosolids may have; the possible presence of PFAS and resulting health risks is scary. We have and always will be committed to protecting public health and the environment and will continue to adhere to the strict EPA standards that have existed for years to ensure that biosolids are used safely.

EPA recently released a draft risk assessment looking at potential risks stemming from the presence of PFAS in biosolids. The draft assessment found that the presence of PFOA and PFOS may adversely impact human health for a very narrow and specific segment of the population – a hypothetical farm family – that EPA considers most likely to be exposed to PFOA or PFOS from the land application of biosolids. However, the assessment did not indicate any risk to the general public or to the general food supply, and the assumptions EPA used in the assessment were both hypothetical and conservative.

The presence of PFAS in biosolids calls for more scientific study, and state and federal regulatory agencies should not rush to judgment or hastily pass new regulations around this complicated issue before we get all the facts. That’s why we are urging close coordination between EPA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) – which have both strongly supported biosolids use for years – to identify a sustainable path forward that protects public health, crops, and water quality without unnecessarily diverting tons of valuable nitrogen and phosphorus used in biosolids to landfills where they will be wasted.

Finally, it’s important to note that clean water utilities like ours are not the manufacturers or creators of PFAS, but instead are passive receivers of the chemicals through the wastewater stream. These chemicals are manufactured by commercial companies for use in products sold to the public.

So, to truly control the levels of PFAS in our natural environment, it will require the actual producers of these chemicals to reduce or eliminate their continued use in everyday products and industrial processes. The responsibility for these chemicals in our environment should fall squarely where it belongs – on those who produce it and profit from it, not on local ratepayers through higher wastewater treatment costs.

If EPA determines that the risk from PFAS warrants additional regulation of biosolids, clean water utilities will do their part to meet those new standards. But until all the facts surrounding PFAS are clear, we should stick with the proven regulations on the use of biosolids. It has been working for the water treatment facilities, farmers and the general public who have all benefited from this sustainable practice for many years. We look forward to working with regulators and our agricultural partners to further study this issue and ensure we continue to serve our customers and community with the highest level of environmental and public health protection.

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