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Sludge with lead put on Kenosha County fields

By [Don Behm](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Feb. 22, 2010 | [\(0\) Comments](#)

Dried sewage sludge containing unusually high concentrations of lead was spread by mistake on fields at two Kenosha County farms late last year, officials at the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District said Monday.

About 692 tons of sludge from the district's South Shore sewage treatment plant in Oak Creek was delivered to the farms in late November or early December, said John Jankowski, district manager of contract compliance.

Some of the sludge contained up to 1,100 parts per million of lead, nearly one-third more than allowed under a permit, Jankowski said.

A state permit allows the district to spread sludge with a maximum level of 840 parts per million of lead. No sludge tested since 2003 contained more than 230 parts per million, district records show.

MMSD is investigating whether waste with excessive levels of lead might have been dumped illegally into the regional sewer system sometime in October, according to Jankowski.

Tests of soil collected in January from the Kenosha County fields did not find health-threatening levels of the heavy metal, Jankowski said.

All of the soil contained between 15 and 25 parts per million of lead, which is within the range of naturally occurring lead levels in Kenosha County soils, according to state soil scientists.

The state Department of Natural Resources has asked MMSD to test additional soil samples from the fields in spring, after the snow cover has melted and the ground has thawed, as a precaution.

"This is not an alarming situation and there should be no environmental harm," said Christine Lilek, a senior wastewater specialist with the DNR in Plymouth.

Though dried sludge is tested regularly for lead, fecal bacteria and a few other contaminants, Jankowski said his office did not become aware of the test results until after this batch of the product already had been used. A new procedure will ensure that test results are checked before sludge is trucked to farms, he said.

No-cost fertilizer

Several times a year, dried sludge is given to farmers - at no cost to them - to be used as a nitrogen fertilizer.

A Town of Bristol farm received the bulk of the high-lead sludge: about 473 tons was spread on 98 acres. About 219 tons of the sludge was distributed over 38 acres at a Town of Wheatland farm. An MMSD contractor uses traditional manure spreaders in applying the product.

Soil at the farms had accumulated between 9.6 and 12.8 pounds of lead per acre, tests found. A state permit limits accumulation of lead in soil at participating farms to no more than 13.4 pounds per year, Jankowski said.

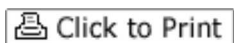
Each day, human feces and other sewage solids from the Jones Island and South Shore plants are piped to large tanks, known as digesters, at South Shore. This mix is heated and bacteria and other microbes digest the organic wastes. Methane released from the microbes is collected and burned as a fuel at South Shore.

Digested sludge is removed from the tanks and the bulk of it is shipped to the Jones Island plant to be dried and included in Milorganite, the district's fertilizer brand.

Sludge not needed for Milorganite production is dried and spread on farm fields. As much as 5,000 tons of sludge is distributed to farms each year, Jankowski said.

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