

Ont. should stop using sewage sludge as fertilizer until health impact clear: NDP

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TORONTO — Ontario's food supply may become increasingly tainted by drugs like Valium and other hazardous chemicals as long as sewage sludge continues to be used as crop fertilizer, critics charged Thursday.

Critics are calling on the Ontario government to ban the use of sludge - a mix of household and industrial waste - at the province's farms until the full impact of its health effects is known.

"We are letting people use sludge on crop fields in Ontario while we don't know the effect on our food and we don't know the effect on our health," said NDP health critics France Gelinias.

"But there are enough red flags going up by enough people to know that somebody has to be mandated to look at this seriously and do the serious research."

Environmentalists say the issue is especially concerning in the wake of recent outbreaks of E. coli, salmonella and Listeria. And while there may not be enough research done on the direct impact of food grown in sludge, there have been cases that show dangers exist.

In Georgia, for instance, farmers fertilizing with sewage sludge discovered the milk that their dairy cows produced was extremely high in Valium. Several major food companies, including Campbell and Del Monte, won't use food that has been fertilized by sludge, saying not enough is known about it.

Wendy Deavitt of Warkworth, Ont., said her health started to deteriorate "almost within hours" after her neighbour began using sludge on the fields around her farm.

She said her family and animals have suffered from chronic coughs, headaches, fatigue, diarrhea and nausea, as well as blood, bladder and urinary tract infections.

"This not just affects our health, our animals' health, (but also) our property value," Deavitt said.

"Would you buy our farm? Not likely. You'd be too afraid of what's going to happen to you and your animals should you get ill, which makes our property virtually worthless."

Farmers say the industrial toxins, heavy metals, drugs and diseases contained in sludge make it potentially much more dangerous than other types of fertilizers like animal manure.

"I've never seen a cow dump used motor oil down its toilet, and that's what happens every day (with sludge)," said Grant Roberston, Ontario co-ordinator for the National Farmers Union.

The union supports a ban of sewage sludge until processes are in place to remove all its toxic residues, and argues the people in the area directly affected should be properly notified about the practice.

Contractors spreading sludge should also be required to conduct environmental impact studies prior to beginning operations, Roberston said.

About 120,000 tonnes of sludge are spread on 150 square kilometres of farm fields in Ontario with what critics say is no real monitoring system to track health concerns.

Agriculture Minister Leona Dombrowsky said in the legislature Thursday that the government is taking "a very balanced approach (and) a science-based approach" to the issue and has been consulting with its partners across the province.

The Environment Ministry considers the fertilizer safe as long as the government's standards are followed.

The bulk of the sludge is distributed for free, a practice that Roberston said puts a lot of pressure on cash-strapped farmers to opt for sludge at a time when commercial fertilizer prices are skyrocketing and farmers' revenues are dwindling.

"There's an understandable pressure that is placed on a lot of farmers to be able to do this, but in the long-term, their interests, the interests of Ontario citizens and other farmers, are damaged," said Roberston, who lives in the municipality that includes Walkerton, Ont., where seven people died from E. coli contamination in the water supply in 2000.

"I know people who got sick through the tainted water in Walkerton," he said.

"We don't want to get this (issue of) citizens' health wrong."

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