

Group's Appeal Puts Kings County, Calif., Composting Facility on Hold The Fresno Bee February 26, 2004, Thursday

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HEADLINE: Group's Appeal Puts Kings County, Calif., Composting Facility on Hold

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BODY:

Kings County's first biosolids composting facility is on hold after an environmental group filed an appeal of the facility's conditional-use permit.

The Kings County Planning Commission had approved a conditional-use permit last week for a 1,000 acre organic waste composting facility that would process up to 500,000 wet tons of biosolids, mainly sludge produced from treated human waste, each year. Those biosolids would be combined with at least 400,000 tons of agriculture and green waste to produce 900,000 wet tons of compost each year.

The proposed facility would be located two miles east of Interstate 5 and four miles to the east-southeast of Kettleman City.

The sludge proposed to be used is a byproduct of wastewater from several Los Angeles County water treatment facilities. Strict guidelines are laid out for the use of sludge in composting, according to Bill Zumwalt, planning director for Kings County.

"The bacteria in the sludge has to be dead," Zumwalt said. "Also, the heat produced during the composting process will kill the pathogens."

The Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, a San Francisco Bay Area environmental group with a branch office in Delano, filed an appeal Wednesday arguing that the facility's environmental-impact report does not comply with the California Environmental Quality Act. Caroline Farrell, an attorney with the CRPE, said Kings County made inaccurate assumptions when it compiled the EIR for the project.

"The EIR states that the project will have a benefit to air quality because it will use agricultural waste such as orchard prunings as bulking agents which would otherwise have been burned," Farrell wrote in a letter to Kings County. "However, this pollution reduction cannot be legally attributed to the project because SB705 will prohibit open burning of orchard prunings and other agriculture waste no later than 2010."

Farrell said that fact means that the facility's analysis of air quality impacts are based upon a faulty premise. Her group believes the EIR should be redone to analyze the true impacts of the project.

Zumwalt said the issue now goes before the Kings County Board of Supervisors, probably next month.

Zumwalt said the county is confident the EIR is correct and said while people may find the idea of using human waste products to produce compost undesirable, the idea is not new.

"There is already a similar facility in Kern County, and the use of human waste products as a fertilizer is practiced worldwide," Zumwalt said. "In fact, there is a product on the market, Kellogg's Amend, that is

very similar to the compost this facility would produce."

Zumwalt said all compost produced at the Westlake Farms facility will be used on Westlake, allowing the grower to increase the acreage they farm in the Valley.

"The land that will be farmed is currently fallow," Zumwalt said. "Producing this composting material would allow Westlake to put the land to use."

Another factor in the facility's favor is its remote location, Zumwalt said.

"The facility would be several miles from any residences, and the land that would be farmed is also very remote," Zumwalt said.

Zumwalt said the county and the grower have done extensive research to ensure the proposal is not harmful to the county in any way.

"The environmental impact that was done for this project looked at air quality, hydrology, which includes surface and ground water, and wildlife and found no negative impacts," Zumwalt said.

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