

The New Jersey Farmer

Right goal, wrong direction (Viewpoint)

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By Sally Brown

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(Editor's note: Sally Brown is a research professor at the University of Washington.)

In the final days of the Biden administration, the Environmental Protection Agency released a draft report assessing the risk of biosolids – that's the term for a fertilizer recycled from our wastewater — as it pertains to PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances), commonly known as “forever chemicals.”

This group of 3,000-plus manmade chemicals permeate virtually every aspect of our lives: they are in cookware, food packaging, carpets, cleaning products, and cosmetics, to name a few.

The authors used the extremely low-end numbers of 1 part per billion of perfluorooctanoic acid and perfluorooctane sulfonic acid, to model the hypothetical risks of PFAS to a family using biosolids on their farm. To put this number in perspective, dental floss contains an average of 2.5 million parts per billion of PFAS. The rainwater itself contains more PFAS than their hypothetical biosolids application, and yet none of these sources were taken into account by the report.

It is far from clear what, if anything, the current administration will do with this document, still in draft form. In the meantime, anti-biosolids advocates are using it to push state legislatures to ban biosolids. This is a misguided and damaging approach that will only hurt the farmers it purports to protect.

There are many things we can all agree on. We all want healthy soil. We all want to stop climate change. And none of us want chemicals like these hanging around in our bodies.

Banning biosolids, with the stated goal of reducing our exposure to these chemicals, will accomplish none of the above. In fact, it will have no meaningful impact on our PFAS exposure. It will negatively impact soils and the atmosphere, all while costing utility ratepayers dearly for the privilege.

Using biosolids to improve depleted soils is not a new concept. Long before we had centralized wastewater treatment, human waste was a prized commodity for agriculture.

Its use, in combination with other organic byproducts, kept soils in Asia productive for centuries. With the advent of centralized wastewater collection and treatment, and development of technology to manufacture chemical fertilizers, we've had the luxury of forgoing the benefits of these materials. Now as we come to understand soil health, research has shown adding organic matter, which is essentially the carbon biosolids is loaded with, helps soils hold nutrients, retain water, improve drought resistance and much more. At the same time, research has also shown burning or landfilling these materials results in huge emissions of greenhouse gases.

In isolated cases, most of which occurred decades ago, certain industries discharged PFAS-laden wastes into sewers, and those chemicals resulted in high levels of contamination downstream. Prohibiting manufacture of those compounds and controlling their discharge has shown to be highly effective at reducing the loads of these compounds into municipal systems. But we are still left with small traces of these chemicals in our biosolids. The majority of this comes from our homes, and likely from our poop. That means that the concentrations of these chemicals are typically higher in our blood than they would be in soil amended with biosolids.

The corollary of the expression "you are what you eat" is that you are what you poop. Our urine and feces provide a tool to understand a range of things about ourselves. The microbial composition of our feces can tell us what part of the world we come from and the health of our diets. Virus fragments in our wastewater have been used to track the outbreak of illnesses, including COVID 19.

The presence of PFAS in our waste is also a way to track our exposure to these compounds. A study using dog and cat feces as surrogates for human waste showed consistently high concentrations of PFAS. This was not from eating biosolids. More likely it came from sleeping on couches and carpets, both of which often have high concentrations of these chemicals. Instead of focusing on the sources of PFAS, we're blaming biosolids, which is merely the messenger.

Farmers who use biosolids typically report reduced fertilization costs, improved soil metrics, and higher yields. Using these natural amendments makes agriculture more sustainable. Not using them does not prevent soils from having measurable PFAS concentrations as the compounds now fall from the sky with rainwater.

If you are concerned about exposure to "forever chemicals," start in your home. If you are truly concerned about our planet, I encourage you to recognize the beauty of biosolids.

Trump EPA withdrawal of PFAS effluent limits is setback for public health, EWG warns

PRESS CONTACT

Monica Amarelo

monica@ewg.org

(202) 939-9140

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WASHINGTON – On Tuesday, the Trump Environmental Protection Agency withdrew a pending Biden administration plan that would have protected public health from the chemical manufacturing sector by setting **discharge limits** on the toxic **“forever chemicals”** known as PFAS.

The Trump administration pulled the proposal from White House review – the last step before the agency could release the plan publicly and seek comment on it. The decision is a significant setback for efforts to address the growing public health crisis caused by industrial PFAS pollution of the water supply.

Coupled with President Donald Trump’s **executive order** placing a freeze on any new federal regulations, the withdrawal prompts significant concerns from environmental and public health advocates about the future of PFAS regulation and whether tackling the PFAS contamination crisis will be an administration priority.

The following is a statement from **Melanie Benesh**, vice president for government affairs at the Environmental Working Group:

Yesterday’s action by the Trump administration to withdraw the long-awaited proposal on PFAS effluent limits is a devastating setback in the fight to protect our communities from toxic “forever chemicals.”

This move not only delays establishing critical federal standards but also sends a dangerous message giving polluters a green light to continue poisoning our water and communities without fear of consequence.

It's an unconscionable betrayal of the public's health in favor of corporate interests, and it underscores this administration's troubling shift in policy which threatens to roll back any progress to protect our environment and hold polluters accountable.

PFAS contamination is already a public health crisis. The science is clear: PFAS are toxic at even the smallest levels, and they have been linked to serious health problems, including cancer, immune suppression and developmental harm. Communities across the country, especially those near PFAS-manufacturing facilities, have lived with the devastating consequences of this pollution for decades.

State regulators have waited for the federal government to lead on this issue so they can incorporate effective monitoring and treatment requirements into their discharge permits. Without federal limits, those efforts remain stalled.

The Trump administration's refusal to act now puts even more lives at risk, leaving American communities to fend for themselves as polluters continue their unchecked discharges of toxic PFAS into our water.