

News biosolids application sites to be considered by DEQ

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Baltimore-based Biosolids Management Firm Synagro Central is requesting to renew its permit for the application of biosolids as fertilizer in Nelson County.

Of a total 2,448 acres to be applied with biosolids over eight sites, 937.4 acres over three sites are new.

Representatives from Synagro and the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) held an informational meeting June 7 for landowners and residents adjacent to the proposed new sites to ask questions.

According to DEQ, biosolids are solid, semisolid or liquid materials removed from municipal sewage and treated to be suitable as fertilizer. Sewage sludge solids are separated from wastewater at treatment facilities and can then be incinerated, sent to a landfill or receive additional treatment to be used as biosolids. Synagro, and any facility that produces biosolids, must obtain a permit from DEQ before applying the product.

Synagro's permit application includes three new sites: two in the county's South District and one in the West. The 8.8-acre West District site is located along Crabtree Falls Highway between Snugdale Lane and Jonesboro Road and across the highway from an existing 36.5-acre biosolid application site. One South District site is between Norwood Road, Union Hill Drive, Round Top Lane and the James River and is 35.2 acres. Henry Fitzgerald of Fitzgerald Farms is the farm operator of both sites.

The second South District site, located south of where the Tye River becomes the Buffalo and divided by Greenfield Drive and Tye River Road, is by far the largest at 835 acres. Tye River Ventures LLC owns the tax parcel and Sandy Garber is the farm operator of the site.

DEQ Environmental Specialist Stephanie Bowman said the Tye River Ventures site will be used for silviculture, or forest management, and the landowners intend to grow pine trees on the site.

Bowman said she has received one comment so far from a Nelson County resident concerned about biosolids application at the Tye River Ventures site potentially affecting water quality and another comment from a resident with no concerns about the renewal of Synagro's biosolids permit.

Supervisor Ernie Reed expressed concern to representatives about the new sites' locations within the Tye River watershed and asked if there would be any consideration for the Tye's impaired status. DEQ listed the Tye as an impaired waterway in its 2020 Water Quality Assessment Integrated Report. The

Environmental Protection Agency defines waterways as impaired when they do not meet an applicable water quality standard; for the Tye the classification is based on pollution threatening aquatic life.

After the meeting, he explained his concern was rainfall after biosolids application could wash pollutants into the waterway.

DEQ Office of Land Application Programs Manager Neil Zahradka told Reed when a farmer chooses to use biosolids, they're choosing to use the most regulated fertilizer (other fertilizers include commercial and animal manure). He also pointed to the minimum setback restrictions DEQ requires for biosolids application: at least 100 feet from water supply wells, 400 feet from public water supply reservoirs, 100 feet from surface waters without a vegetated buffer and 35 feet from surface waters with this buffer, among other minimum setbacks from dwellings and publicly accessible sites.

Zahradka added biosolids application requires a permit, whereas other activities contributing to the Tye's impairment are unregulated. The permit application Synagro has submitted includes farm operators' agreement to adhere to a page-worth of regulations for livestock grazing, soil pH and harvest timing. Zahradka later said land applicants must take a three-day certification course.

Of the 836-acre Tye River Ventures application site, 182 acres are labeled "environmentally sensitive soils" — due to either shallow soil or a high water table — in the permit application. Of the 35.2-acre Norwood Road application site, 18.32 acres are mapped as environmentally sensitive solid due to high water and leaching. These two factors also are listed as the cause for environmentally sensitive soils at the Crabtree Falls Highway site: 7.9 acres of 8.8.

Zahradka said a nutrient management plan is required for these sites because of this factor. According to DEQ, nutrient management plans are developed to establish the amount and timing of biosolids application.

After the meeting, Reed noted none of the biosolids to be applied are produced in Nelson County. Synagro will instead haul biosolids to the Nelson County sites via routes detailed in the application. The arrangement is not ideal, Reed said, because people who live outside the county and contribute to Synagro's biosolid production are less likely to care about inorganic materials flushed down their toilets, whereas a Nelson County resident might be more conscientious if biosolids used on Nelson County farms came from the county's sewage.

DEQ will review Synagro's permit application and comments received at the public information meeting and may draft a permit for pollution management. If DEQ drafts a permit, a notice will appear in the Nelson County Times inviting public comment. Community members can send comments to DEQ via email, fax or postal mail.