

BIOSOLIDS NEWS

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Providing local oversight

Biosolids monitor covers five-county area

For someone who has spent his life in agriculture, Manuel Toombs' position as Regional Biosolids Monitor for five counties offers everything he could want—the opportunity to be outdoors instead of cooped up in an office, to help farmers and their neighbors and to help protect the environment.

This is a man who loves his job.

Toombs has monitored biosolids land application for four years in Buckingham, Charlotte, Cumberland, Lunenburg and Prince Edward counties. As the only multi-county biosolids monitor in the state, he covers an area of approximately 2,100 square miles and travels more than 20,000 miles each year.

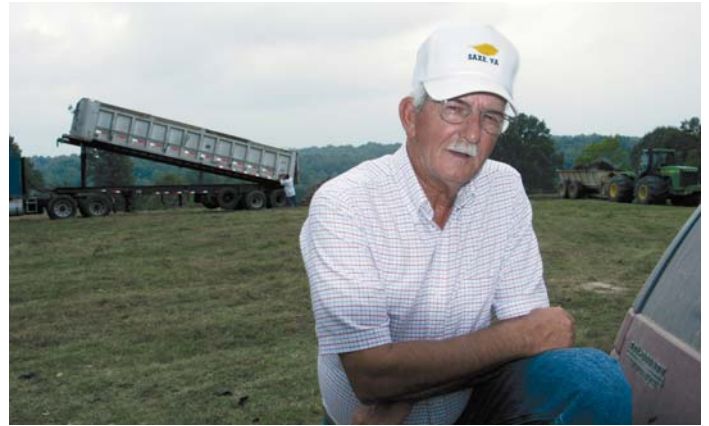
Agriculture is vital to the region's economy and biosolids are in great demand from area farmers.

Under an agreement between the counties, the Prince Edward County planning and zoning department provides the administrative support for Toombs. The counties, which have each passed a biosolids ordinance approved by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, are reimbursed for Toomb's salary and expenses by DEQ, which regulates the land application of biosolids in the Commonwealth.

The funds for the monitoring program are provided by fees collected from biosolids land application and are only available to counties that have passed an approved biosolids ordinance. A total of 28 Virginia counties currently have monitoring programs.

Agricultural experience

Toombs was a natural choice for the position, which because of the large territory and popularity of biosolids among the area's farmers, quickly became almost a full-time job. He is a farmer himself and has had careers with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and as a tobacco grader. He credits this professional experience, and the lessons learned about "getting along with peo-



Manuel Toombs

ple," with helping to balance the often differing goals and sometimes contentious opinions associated with the land application of biosolids.

"It's important that you always show respect for people," says Toombs, "be willing to listen to their concerns and take the time to explain how the program works."

"Biosolids land application has got to be the most inspected program in the state," says Toombs. He points out that he and a DEQ inspector are on site for every biosolids application. In addition, any site that receives material from Washington, DC's Blue Plains facility, which provides the majority of biosolids for the region, is also monitored by an inspector from Maryland Environmental Services (MES), an independent environmental agency. The MES inspector gathers samples of the material for laboratory testing to ensure compliance with state and EPA regulations and Blue Plains standards. MES inspectors also use a special device to measure odor at each site.

"My job is to represent the counties in the region," explained Toombs, "and ensure that the application of biosolids on each site is done in accordance with regulations." While he believes that the practice is safe and

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The Virginia Biosolids Council supports the recycling of biosolids in Virginia through information and education on the beneficial use and safety of biosolids. The Council is supported by municipal wastewater treatment plants, land application and composting companies and biosolids users, and is available as a resource to those who need information about the recycling of biosolids.

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Regional biosolids monitor

beneficial when performed according to regulations, he does not see himself as an advocate for the program or as an adversarial watchdog.

“The goal is to ensure compliance in the first place, which protects public health and the environment, rather than issuing citations after a violation has occurred,” said Toombs. “My experience is that the land application companies want to do a good job, both for their farmers and the environment, and to avoid situations that undermine support for the program from the public and from local and state officials.”

Willful violations of regulations, although rare, are not tolerated, however, and application sites can be shut down by DEQ, which can also issue citations and fines.

Complaints have declined

“Four years ago,” says Toombs, “there was considerable opposition to biosolids in some counties and frustration that state law prevented localities from restricting land application. Now, I think people see the monitoring program as giving the counties a measure of control.”

According to Jonathan Pickett, director of planning and zoning for Prince Edward County, Toombs’ activities have resulted in a significant decline in complaints. “I rarely get a call about biosolids,” says Pickett, who describes the monitoring program as “wonderful.”

Pickett says residents of the region appreciate Toombs’ low key approach, his knowledge and his willingness to listen and respond to their concerns.

“When an application is scheduled,” explains Toombs, “I try to contact neighbors who have expressed concerns in the past, explain what is going to happen and how I am going to monitor the entire process. People seem reassured that there is someone local looking out for their interests.”

For Toombs, the monitoring process includes being on every site and comparing the nutrient management and application plans approved by DEQ with what is actually going on in the field. This includes checking the slopes on the site and making sure that buffer distances protecting streams, lakes, residences and property lines are properly marked and observed by the applicator.

Toombs can also take samples of the biosolids for testing and can test wells and streams before and after applications. In all cases, he says, the biosolids have tested well within EPA standards and there has been no evidence of contamination of wells, streams or lakes.

Concerns are sometimes expressed by people with existing health conditions, he says, who think that biosolids can make their conditions worse. “I explain what the research is and that there is no evidence

biosolids will affect their health. That was the conclusion by the Virginia Expert Panel on biosolids, which looked at health and environmental issues last year. I also point out that I spend a lot of time around biosolids—something I wouldn’t do if I didn’t think it was safe. I think that does reassure most people.”

Some opponents of biosolids may see this reassurance on health as advocacy for biosolids, but Toombs says “scaring people with unfounded health claims isn’t good for anyone, especially those who are already dealing with health issues.”

People who have moved from an urban area and are not familiar with common agricultural practices and rural culture are also likely to be more suspicious of biosolids, observes Toombs.

Concern about actual or anticipated odors still generates complaints, he says, although they have diminished as treatment facilities have improved their processes and land application companies make adjustments in their practices to accommodate neighbors. Some odor complaints are caused by the spreading of poultry litter, he explains, which is not regulated like the biosolids program.

While complaints about land application have declined, calls can be generated by “track-out,” which occurs when biosolids get stuck to vehicle tires at the site and then scattered on the highway.

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To help prevent track-out, Toombs and DEQ inspectors try to make sure that vehicles don’t drive through areas in the field that have received biosolids and that drivers of trucks delivering biosolids scrape any material off the tires, mud flaps and dump gates of the trucks and trailers before they leave the field. The inspectors also make sure the trailers are covered when they arrive and when they leave the site.

Frequently, says Toombs, reports of track-out turn out to have resulted from mud, not biosolids, and sometimes it wasn’t even the result of land application vehicles. Every incident is investigated, however, feedback provided to the complainant and a report created on the outcome and any action taken.

For more information, go to www.virginiabiosolids.com



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