

Agenda Item No. 6

TO: Swale Rural Forum
DATE: 13th October 2009 7pm
SUBJECT: Use of Paper Waste and Sludge by Farmers on Land
BY: Alister Andrews (Environment Response Manager)
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report is an *update* on the issue of materials being spread on agricultural land.

This matter has gained a significant amount of media interest this summer. Materials which have been spread have included paper sludge, sewage sludge, compost, and farmyard manure. These are all recognised agricultural practices, yet the processes need to comply with the appropriate codes and legislation in order to reduce the impact of such activities on nearby communities.

Swale Borough Council, and the Environment Agency have been working together to investigate potential solutions to reduce the impact from these activities on communities. It is hopeful that by ensuring that the codes of practice are all complied with, and by negotiating further potential control measures with the operators, the operations which have caused problems this summer can be controlled to an acceptable level.

It is important to remember that these activities recycle a significant amount of material within our area, and reduce the need for inorganic materials to be produced and spread on agricultural land. We are looking at methods of balancing the beneficial environmental impacts of these activities, with adequate control mechanisms to prevent odour.

It is also important to recognise that there have been many spreading activities within Swale this summer, yet the vast majority of substantiated complaints have been received from a small handful of isolated incidents (for which some investigations are ongoing).

Implications: Human Resources Implications - N/A

Finance Implications – N/A

Legal Implications – N/A

Crime & Disorder Implications (Section 17) - N/A

Equalities & Diversity Implications – N/A

Sustainability Implications – The recycling of these materials have environmental benefits, and divert significant amounts of waste from landfill.

Risk and Health and Safety Implications – N/A

Corporate Plan Implications - N/A

Decision Required: **No decision to be made. This report is for information purposes**

at the request of the forum.

Introduction/Background

Various commercial or industrial processes give rise to 'waste' materials, which actually have some valuable properties to other industries. Due to economic, environmental, and legislative demands, the recycling of such materials has evolved significantly in previous years. With the banning of materials being disposed off at sea in the late 1990's, companies such as those in the water and paper industries invested in further treatment of these materials, so that they would be suitable for alternative use such as fertilisers and soil conditioners on land. This also diverts a substantial amount of waste from landfill. Different wastes undergo different treatments, with varying levels of success. However, the treatment processes are recognised, and the standards agreed by the appropriate authorities to ensure that there will be no risk to the environment, or harm to human health.

The roles as regulators in this area are split between the Local Authority, and the Environment Agency (EA), depending on waste type, or activity that is being completed. Swale BC and the EA have been working very closely during the investigative stages of various complaints this summer. The plan is to continue our investigations to identify if specific legislation has been breached (and if so to take the appropriate action), but also to work closely, and identify the issues which have caused some isolated activities to give rise to an unacceptable level of odour. By working with industry to recognise these factors, and agree methods for eliminating the reoccurrence of these events, we are hopeful that we can reduce the impact of these activities on communities for future years.

Due to the growing season of many crops, the application of such fertilisers is necessary in summer months, as this is the time when crops have been harvested, and the farmers can access their fields.

The Local Authority and the Environment Agency feel that it would be beneficial to work with the relevant companies in order to investigate the reasons for these events, and identify control mechanisms to prevent re-occurrences of unacceptable activities.

Sewage Sludge

This is generally the solid material which is left after sewage is treated in a wastewater treatment works. This material is usually fairly dry and has undergone one of several recognised practices to ensure that it does not pose a risk to the environment or harm to human health. The stockpiling on site of this material (before spreading) is regulated by the Environment Agency, yet the spreading, and incorporation of this material is regulated by the Local Authority. The origins of the material used in Kent are mainly from Southern Water Services, and Thames Water. Many thousands of tonnes of this material are spread in Kent each year. There are various treatment processes for this material, yet the main one used involves 'digestion'. Product produced through this process does not usually give rise to many complaints, if the site is properly risk assessed for suitability prior to spreading, and the necessary factors are complied with in the Codes of Practice. There may well be an odour associated with the activity whilst it is in operation, but this odour subsides if it is incorporated under the soil surface to a satisfactory standard, in a prompt fashion.

There was one significant substantiated odour complaint received from sewage sludge spreading within Swale this year.

In late July 2009, Swale Borough Council received a substantial amount of complaints due to an activity to the south of Leysdown and Warden on the Isle of Sheppey. This material involved a '*lime stabilised*' sewage sludge being spread. This material generally has a stronger odour associated with it, and due to the location of the activity, and the prevailing winds, a substantial number of complaints were received from holidaymakers in the area, and residents alike. This investigation is ongoing. We are also investigating the possibility of reaching an agreement with the companies and farmers involved in these activities to reduce the impact from this particular type of treated sludge during key periods of the year.

Paper Sludge

The North Kent coast has a larger paper producing industry than other parts of the country. One of the by-products from this industry is paper sludge. Similarly to sewage Sludge, this material has properties which can benefit agricultural land. It also has different standards to which it can be treated depending on the source of the material. The vast majority of paper sludge in Swale is spread on fields without problems. However, during July and August 2009 significant complaints were received from residents in villages to the south of Sittingbourne due to some particularly odorous paper waste being spread.

This activity is regulated by the Environment Agency. Local Authority officers worked with the EA during the investigation, and the EA are currently continuing this investigation to ascertain why this incident occurred, and to determine if further action is required.

Compost

With more households recycling, and an increase in the recycling of garden waste and green waste, there will obviously be an increase in the amount of compost produced. An establishment has been set up at Ridham dock in Swale to turn this garden waste into compost. This establishment has recently invested in the necessary equipment to produce a product, which reaches the latest standards known as PAS 100. This product should be treated to a standard where it poses very little risk with regards to odour (as well as harm to the environment or human health).

This material is used on farms in the area, and this process may well expand in the coming years. There have been a few incidents this summer, where compost has been spread on fields, which has given rise to odours. These materials were usually from non PAS 100 accredited composts. The Local Authority and the EA have been monitoring these matters closely, and we will be meeting with the necessary industry to investigate methods of preventing further issues. We will be reviewing the impacts that the further treatment is having, as well as reviewing the risk assessment stages for storage and spreading.

UPDATE – Swale BC met with representatives from Thameswater plc on 29/09/09. It was agreed that Thameswater will not be spreading lime treated sewage sludge on the Isle of Sheppey between 1st May and 30th September 2010. They will only spread this material in Swale outside of these dates, or at limited locations on the mainland after prior consultation with the local authority. This will allow the authority to consider the

suitability of the site for this material, and ensure that all necessary control measures are in place. This should be robust enough to prevent any future odour complaints from lime treated sewage sludge. If the local authority feel that the site and controls are not suitable, they will be able to use their enforcement powers to restrict/ prevent the process.

This will be reviewed in 2010.

At the time of submitting this report, the local authority were still awaiting similar confirmation from Southern Water Services.