

The storage and use of organic fertilisers on agricultural land

Organic fertilisers offer valuable nutrients for crops, at reduced cost, in addition to diverting waste from alternative disposal routes. This practice has been in use for many years, and with waste disposal prices increasing and more demand for recycling, industry has recognised opportunities to continue harnessing nutrients from materials such as sewage sludge, paper sludge, compost, and farm yard manure.

The storage and use of such products are recognised activities, and they are identified within the Code of Good Agricultural Practice (COGAP). The processes by which different materials are controlled can be complex. Legislation empowers different organisations to tackle separate issues, depending on the product, the activity, and status i.e. is the material a 'waste' or not; is it being spread or stockpiled etc. In order to avoid residents becoming confused, Swale Borough Council (SBC) and the Environment Agency (EA) advise residents that they may contact either organisation if they have concerns regarding the stockpiling, or spreading of organic materials on agricultural land (EA telephone 03708 506506; SBC telephone 01795417850). The agencies will then communicate between themselves to investigate the matter.

Many of these materials are produced all year round, yet they are usually only spread between different crops being grown on the field. This results in many products being imported and stored in the fields where they are to be used. Stockpiles are usually permitted for a 12 month period. Stockpiles are acceptable, but they should comply with the relevant legislation which includes measures to control pollution (e.g. safe distances from watercourses), and advice on preventing nuisance. In practice it makes sense for farmers and contractors to consider the most viable location for stockpiles at the planning stage whilst developing their nutrient management plan – considering easy access, as well as limiting any nuisance factors.

There may be some odour generated when certain materials are imported to the field. In theory once the pile is complete, it should crust over and seal in any odours until the farmers dig into it for spreading.

The recommended spreading applications vary depending on various factors. This can be complex, and application rates are detailed in a booklet entitled 'Fertiliser Recommendations' or more commonly referred to as 'RB209'. The legislation and regulatory bodies can be difficult to understand, and different rules apply depending on farm location, and factors such as whether the field is in a 'Nitrate Vulnerable Zone' (NVZ) or not. Different products need to meet different quality criteria's. For example, compost is no longer defined as a 'waste' if it meets the industry standard of PAS 100. Sewage sludge applications need to meet the criteria outlined in the

'Safe Sludge Matrix', and the parameters outlined in the 'Sewage Sludge Use in Agriculture' Regulations 1989.

Spreading organic manures can occur throughout the year, but the time when this is most noticeable by residents is when the crop is harvested, and the field is fertilised before re-seeding the next crop, usually in late summer (but this can also be in the spring). This is usually because it coincides with the warm weather and many people have windows open. By SBC and the EA working very closely with the farmers, product producers, and contractors, the vast majority of stockpiles and spreading activities go unnoticed by residents. However, there are occasions when odours are witnessed. The regulatory bodies will investigate the activity, and suggest remedial actions if it is found to be unacceptable. COGAP suggests that farmers should *"...incorporate solid manures into the soil as soon as possible and at the latest within 24 hours"*.

In Swale, we have worked closely with all parties, with a focus on preventing odours. Ideas developed in Swale are being replicated throughout the country as best practice. Many farmers now actively consider issues such as incorporation methods, wind direction, day of the week, and potentially receptive areas/ communities prior to spreading. The relevant authorities are often notified by contractors prior to activities in order to review impact and control mechanisms. Authorities also advise key community members for information.

By negotiating and discussing concerns with the producers, the number of odour complaints have reduced considerably. In 2009 a large number of complaints were received as a result of lime stabilised sewage sludge being spread on the Isle of Sheppey. In addition to the contractors and farmer taking remedial action to resolve the problem, the producers of the material voluntarily agreed not to spread this form of treated sludge on the Isle of Sheppey between the months of May and September. This voluntary agreement has had very positive impacts, and complaints have reduced considerably.

On the whole, partnership working has been fundamentally successful in resolving issues with organic manure storage and spreading. There will be some odours associated with this activity, but compliance with best practice will ensure that these are kept to a minimum.