

A Sludge Story

By David Broadwater



On December 15th, the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors voted to extend an interim ordinance governing the land application of sewage sludge. The SLO County Agricultural Liaison Advisory Board, Sierra Club, North County Watch, Surfrider, ECOSLO, CalPoly Zero Waste Club, Eric Greening, Holly Sletteland, Terre Dunivant, Linde Owen and Vita Miller urged them to do so in verbal and written comments. The ordinance is an effective ban on the practice.

It looked like an easy, obvious, common sense vote.

Therein lies a tale.

In 1997, Waste Management, the largest waste disposal corporation on the planet, applied to the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board for a permit to dump 50,000 tons per year of sewage sludge on land at the confluence of the Estrella and Salinas rivers in San Miguel.

That was six to eight times the amount of sewage sludge generated in SLO County at the time. Clearly, this site was planned for the importation of sewage sludge from elsewhere. The Water Board permit would have licensed the spreading of sewage sludge containing the maximum legal concentrations of neurotoxic, carcinogenic, and pathogenic agents on land near

the homes of San Miguel residents and over the groundwater from which they pumped their drinking water. In addition to the minimally regulated heavy metals and infectious agents, the permit would have allowed the spreading of unlimited amounts of other heavy metals and pathogens, as well as synthetic chemicals, pharmaceuticals, hormone-disrupting compounds, steroids, and petrochemicals.

Holly Sletteland was the first to shoot up a flare. I don't remember how I heard about it, but we met at a cafe in Atascadero and she filled me in and gave me the documents she'd gathered. I knew about the dangers this posed from an article in *In These Times* magazine and agreed to take on more research and organize some public education and resistance. Holly and I had never met before, but she trusted me to take on the task. We've all been in her debt ever since.

Experience with Oak Tree Alliance's 1978-1982 successful battle against a proposed in-situ uranium mine in the Los Padres National Forest near Black Mountain, when research demonstrated that every mine using this technology had caused permanent, irreversible groundwater heavy metal contamination, gave me some confidence that public education, coalition building among farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, and anti-nuclear activists (the Abalone Alliance, People Generating Energy, Mothers For Peace) could defeat this proposal to poison two watersheds in the North County.

Waste Management, the U.S. EPA western states regional coordinator for sewage sludge land application, the Water Board, SLO City (which wanted to use the dump for its sewage sludge), and District 5 Supervisor Harry Ovitt descended on San Miguel with a barrage of propaganda that sewage sludge is just like the compost people can buy at the nursery, that it's "organic" (as in chemistry, containing carbon atoms), that the heavy metals in sewage sludge (e.g., lead, mercury, arsenic, cadmium, chromium, cesium, strontium, etc., which they didn't mention) are "micronutrients," and that spreading it on the land is "recycling."

When I projected a list of sewage sludge contents on a screen at a San Miguel Advisory Council meeting and described the potential effects on the town's land, water, air and health, it began to dawn on people that they were being played for fools, and the truth began to spread. The initial reception was suspicion among some who considered me an outside agitator who should get out of town. Not many there were granola-munching, tree-hugging eco-socialists.

Then, something serendipitous, fortuitous and accidental happened. Lorraine Scarpace, a North County attorney and member of Life On Planet Earth, went to meet with the Templeton Area Advisory Group to speak about the San Miguel sludge dump plan. But she got the date wrong and stumbled into a meeting of den mothers of a Boy Scout troop from San Miguel! So Lorraine spoke to them instead.

From that day on, the mothers were on the front lines until the end (not to discount the involvement of the men). The combination of the backlash against being lied to and treated like idiots, and the determination to stop the health and environmental harms, lit a wildfire. The mothers asked us to draw up a petition they could circulate, which we did immediately.

Within a matter of days, they collected hundreds of signatures on petitions to the Water Board to require an Environmental Impact Report for the permit. We focused all organizing on the upcoming Water Board hearing. The fire was now a conflagration.

Then something duplicitous and revealing happened. Ovitt and the other BSers (BioSolids, their sewage sludge euphemism) persuaded the Water Board to change the venue of the hearing from SLO City to Salinas by changing the date. They were afraid of the grassroots groundswell against the project.

One thing the sludge-slingers were either ignorant of or failed to account for was the closeness of people in a small rural town who, with their lives so intertwined compared to

metropolitan life, develop the intimacy and solidarity of a tight-knit community. Big Sludge underestimated the concentrated power of people bonded to one another.

On the day of the hearing, Eric Greening rode up with Dr. Willard Osibin of Physicians for Social Responsibility, I rode with Lorraine, and a squad of mothers drove to Salinas. At the hearing, we were up against Waste Management, the USEPA and SLO City before the 9-member board. I got pissed off when they got called first to speak, but Eric told me this was better because we'd be able to rebut their claims, which turned out to be the case. We all testified about the health risks of sewage sludge constituents spread on the land, and my projection of the heavy-metal concentrations in sewage sludge appeared on a big screen, which appeared to stun board members. One, seemingly incredulous, asked Water Board staff (who were recommending permit approval) if the information presented was accurate. The answer was "Yes."

Shortly thereafter, the board voted 6 to 3 to require a full Environmental Impact Report on the project. The fire that was ignited among an informed, engaged and committed public lit the torch of victory. Waste Management decided to withdraw its application.

We enjoy the fruit of that victory today and have ever since it was converted into a struggle for local control of sewage sludge land application, accomplished in 2004. We took control away from the Water Board, which permits the land application of the most contaminated and least treated sewage sludge allowed under state and federal regulations. Two large, multidisciplinary, year-long task forces (one commissioned by the Health Commission, the other by the County Board of Supervisors) were convened to develop policy. The Health Commission recommended that the County assume authority over land application. The County's Treated Sewage Sludge/Biosolids Land Application Task Force designed guidelines for a permanent ordinance and recommended the adoption of an Interim Moratorium ordinance, which the Supervisors did.

By that time, an even more powerful coalition had grown among the agricultural and environmental communities. Groups often at odds with each other over various matters stood shoulder-to-shoulder advocating the same thing. The politicians first got confused, and then clicked their heels and saluted. The most reliable county supervisors have tended to be the conservatives, sensitive to the interests of the agricultural industry and rural residents, whereas the more liberal members seem more susceptible to the "green recycling of a natural resource" sludge-slinger propaganda and cities looking for a cheap means of disposing of their hazardous waste.

The protection we've achieved isn't a sure thing. It depends on the continued engagement of the shared interests of agriculturalists and environmentalists, progressives and conservatives, and rural and urban people. Our Interim Moratorium ordinance, one of the few among California counties to impose an "effective" ban on sewage sludge land application, has put SLO County on the target list of CASA (California Association of Sanitation Agencies, the sewage plant lobby), which has sent representatives from Sacramento to County board hearings to oppose it. Local sewage plant managers have come to accept reality and have repeatedly testified at board hearings in support of the interim moratorium. But if we drop our guard, they, and others throughout the state, from areas with much more highly contaminated sewage sludge, will not hesitate to use our lands as a dumping ground.

I write not out of pride in my role in the ongoing struggle, but in humble gratitude for the privilege I was granted to witness the ordinary people of San Miguel rise up to smack down a giant multinational corporation, state and federal agencies, a back-stabbing Supervisor, and the sludge-slingers who tried to dupe them into allowing the toxification of their soil, water, air and bodies. I tell this story only because many folks might not know it or remember it, and because

of its elucidating and inspirational nature. After the San Miguel victory, I told people that my feet didn't touch the ground for two weeks!

There is good reason for hope in this world. It rests in the willingness of people to use their minds, engage with their hearts, and commit their bodies to a common cause, transcending superficial and transitory divisions. In my little way, I've seen that willingness overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

In the dead of winter, as spring is born and the light and warmth is resurrected from the darkness of the Winter Solstice, may we infuse our spirits with the energy to meet the challenges we face.