**How Sewage Sludge Carries Toxic PFAS from Toilet to Table**
Published Feb 8, 2024

By Mia Difelice

A few years ago, state testing at **dozens of Maine farms** uncovered alarming levels of toxic PFAS contamination. These forever chemicals were in the soil and water, crops and animals. Farms throughout the state were forced to shutter or cull their herds.

While some farms have recovered, others have not. Some farmers have **tested themselves** and their families, finding high levels of PFAS contamination in their bodies.

The main culprit: sewage sludge, the leftovers from treating wastewater. In many states, it's common practice — and even encouraged by state officials — for farmers to spread sludge on their fields as fertilizer.

Think for a moment about everything we flush down our drains: soaps, cleaning chemicals, medicines, waste. In most of the United States, all of this flows through sewer systems and into **sewage treatment plants**. These plants may also process everything from industrial waste to the liquid that leaks from landfills.

Sewage treatment plants process it all and leave behind sludge — a mass of solid waste — plus all the pollutants and chemicals that were removed, but not destroyed, in the treatment processes. In fact, many drugs and personal care products exit treatment plants **unchanged** from how they entered.

The U.S. generates **millions of tons of sludge** every year, and it all needs to go somewhere. Sewage treatment plants **sell nutrient-rich sludge** to farmers as low-cost fertilizer. **Nearly half of all our sludge** is spread on fields. Some sewage plants have even sold or given it away to residents to fertilize home gardens.

But sludge isn't a green plant food — it's riddled with harmful chemicals that leach into soil, plants, water, and even the food we eat. As the crisis in Maine revealed, sludge is a huge conveyor of PFAS forever chemicals. One farm saw PFAS levels in its water **400 times** higher than state limits.

PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are a class of thousands of chemicals. They're **widely used** in all kinds of products for their non-stick, stain-repelling, water-proofing properties. However, these properties have made them unnaturally persistent. PFAS don't easily break down in the environment, and once they get in our bodies, they build up there over time.

Growing research is finding them ***everywhere*** — food, water, packaging, plastics, clothing, and our blood. To make matters worse, they're linked to a **litany of health problems**. Sewage sludge presents yet another contamination pathway. PFAS **leach**

**from sludge** and into our soil and groundwater. They can be **absorbed by the plants** we eat. And they travel from contaminated feed to dairy cows and **their milk**.

Since discovering its crisis, Maine has done more than any state to address PFAS through policy. It **outlawed spreading sludge** on fields and **passed a ban** on non-essential uses of PFAS. Last summer, the state legislature established a **$60 million fund** to help farms contaminated by PFAS.

We need policies like Maine's nationwide. We can start by banning the spread of sewage sludge on fields, but we also need to cut PFAS pollution at the source and provide support to communities facing contamination.

Farmers deserve secure livelihoods without fear of toxic chemicals. Families deserve to eat healthy food without fearing it'll make them sick. With powerful policy, we can address the PFAS crisis and prevent more harm from sludge, or any other source of PFAS pollution.

https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/2024/02/08/pfas-sewage-sludge/