

DEP refutes sludge opponents' victory claim in Slate Belt farming case



These signs warn of the use of biosolids on fields off Tatamy Road near Van Buren Road in Palmer Township. (Rudy Miller | lehighvalleylive.com)

By **Nick Falsone** | For lehighvalleylive.com

[Email the author](#)

on January 28, 2016 at 10:16 AM, updated January 28, 2016 at 10:56 AM

A settlement between Pennsylvania and environmentalists will make it harder for Slate Belt farmers and others tending land near the Delaware River to use a **certain grade of fertilizer** made of human sewage sludge, according to an environmental group.

The Delaware Riverkeeper Network on Wednesday announced the settlement and called it a victory for those looking to protect sensitive wetlands from what it described as "toxic sewage sludge."

But the **Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection**, which regulates the use of biosolids, the technical name for sludge, said the riverkeeper network is mischaracterizing the nature of the settlement.

ADVERTISING

inRead invented by Teads

And the **Upper Mount Bethel Township** farm owner targeted by the riverkeeper network said the effort to quash the use of certain biosolids is misguided and hurtful to farmers.

Biosolids are made of mainly human waste and can contain other materials and disease-causing microorganisms, according to the DEP.

The DEP allows Class A biosolids, the highest quality, to be placed on farms. The settlement announced Wednesday focuses only on the use of Class B, lower-quality biosolids that require permitting, but are still believed by the DEP to be environmentally sound.

The riverkeeper network last July **argued before the Pennsylvania Environmental Hearing Board** that the DEP's permitting process for Class B biosolids was flawed and didn't take into account the impact on water quality standards.



RELATED: Sewage sludge fight continues in Upper Mt. Bethel

The board ordered a full hearing on the matter. That hearing was scheduled for this month, but the settlement makes it unnecessary.

The riverkeeper network, which fought for the more stringent permitting alongside the group Sludge-Free Upper Mount Bethel Township, said the DEP has agreed to revise its standard operating procedures for the permitting "to assess if any additional protective measures may be needed to adequately protect local water resources."

A DEP statement in response to the riverkeeper network's announcement said the agency merely clarified its procedures to account for requirements that are already in place under a compact with the Delaware River Basin Commission.

It still supports farmers' use of Class B biosolids.

"The use of Class B biosolids as fertilizer has been determined to be a 'normal farming operation' by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court," the statement said. "As described by Pennsylvania regulations, the use of biosolids is a beneficial reuse of material that would otherwise be landfilled."

Another component of the settlement calls for Synagro, the company that produces the biosolids, to refrain from applying to place Class B biosolids on three farms in Upper Mount Bethel Township.

Those farms are all owned by Ron Angle and were the subject of the initial appeal to the Environmental Hearing Board.

The riverkeeper network has said the farms drain into the Allegheny Creek, which flows into a section of the Delaware River designated as Special Protection Waters by the DRBC.

Angle on Wednesday said he was unaware of the settlement and was not involved in talks, but he also disputed the riverkeeper network's assertion that biosolids pose any environmental threat.

On the contrary, they're safe and effective resources for farmers, Angle said, adding the riverkeeper network's efforts have hurt farmers.

"I'm not sure what they think they accomplished," he said of the riverkeeper network and Sludge-Free Upper Mount Bethel Township. "If they want to keep trying to hurt farmers, I'm going to keep trying to win the battle for farmers."

Nick Falsone may be reached at nfalsone@lehighvalleylive.com. Follow him on Twitter [@nickfalsone](https://twitter.com/nickfalsone). Find lehighvalleylive.com on Facebook.

Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)

© 2016 PennLive LLC. All rights reserved ([About Us](#)).

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of PennLive LLC.

Community Rules apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site.

[▶ Ad Choices](#)