

LANDSPREADING POLICY PROPOSAL

1. Issue Summary

Landspreading is the practice of applying biosolids (treated sewage sludge) or other waste materials to land for agricultural or disposal purposes. While it can be a method of waste management, landspreading can release harmful toxins and pollutants into the air and groundwater, creating public health and environmental risks. Children are particularly vulnerable to airborne toxins, making landspreading near schools a serious concern.

The desired policy change is to limit the use and geographic placement of landspreading operations in Florida, specifically by:

- Restricting landspreading within a designated radius (e.g., 3–5 miles) of schools, daycares, and residential areas.
- Increasing regulation and oversight to reduce air pollution and contamination of aquifers and waterways.
- Requiring buffer zones and stricter environmental testing before approval of landspreading activities.
- Restricting landspreading within a Springs Priority Focus Area.

Maine Legislature Passes Bill Prohibiting Land Application of Biosolids

<https://www.nacwa.org/news-publications/news-detail/2022/04/20/maine-legislature-passes-bill-prohibiting-land-application-of-biosolids-governor-expected-to-sign>

Environmental Health: <https://ehjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12940-023-01008-4>

2. Background

Florida has historically permitted landspreading under regulation by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), which allows the land application of biosolids as long as certain nutrient management and treatment standards are met. However, as environmental concerns have grown, biosolids management has come under increased scrutiny.

- In 2019, Florida passed SB 712 – the Clean Waterways Act, which required FDEP to adopt new rules for biosolids management, especially in areas where landspreading was contributing to nutrient pollution.
- Despite this, concerns remain over airborne toxins, odor, and water contamination, especially in areas where biosolids are spread near vulnerable populations or near environmentally sensitive regions.

Continued public pressure and scientific studies have revealed gaps in current regulations, especially concerning air quality and proximity to human populations.

National Library of Medicine: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4187293/>

Draft Sewage Sludge Risk Assessment from the United States Environmental Protection Agency: <https://www.epa.gov/biosolids/draft-sewage-sludge-risk-assessment-perfluorooctanoic-acid-pfoa-and-perfluorooctane>

3. Analysis

In many Florida counties, landspreading contributes to:

- Leaching of nitrates and phosphates into the aquifer which could pollute drinking water and contribute to algal blooms in rivers, springs, and estuaries.
- Air pollution from biosolid particles, which poses health risks to nearby residents and school children.
- Damage to local ecosystems and wildlife dependent on Florida's unique spring-fed waterways and wetlands.

In counties with natural springs—such as Hernando County, home to the Weeki Wachee River and a significant portion of the Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) coverage area—nitrate loading from landspreading can degrade water quality and reduce clarity.

Florida Department of Health: https://www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/private-well-testing/_documents/well-water-facts-nitrate.pdf

4. Fiscal Impact

- Reduced costs associated with environmental cleanup, including restoring springs and waterways impacted by nutrient pollution.
- Prevented public health expenditures from exposure to harmful air and waterborne toxins.
- Preserved tourism and recreational revenue, which depends on the health of Florida's freshwater ecosystems.

Inaction could result in greater costs for counties needing to address contaminated water supplies and ecosystem degradation. However, negative impacts to the agricultural community as a revenue and material source should be determined.