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Sewage sludge debate in Cameron turns into 'complete s**tshow' pitting right-to-farm law against neighbors' rights

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Shouting matches erupted at a public hearing last night over the proposed transfer of a state permit for a municipal sludge spreading operation from a Steuben County farming family to a unit of Casella Waste Systems Inc.

Members of the Town of Cameron board sat in stunned silence as emotional speakers repeatedly talked over each other. When tempers cooled, they postponed a planned vote on a proposed one-year moratorium on new or expanded waste services operations in Cameron.

The moratorium could interfere with Leo Dickson & Sons' longstanding practice of spreading municipal sludge, or biosolids, on farm fields in the towns of Cameron, Thurston and Bath.

"Since 1978 we've been bringing in ... biosolids to run our operation," said Brett Dickson, manager of the family's crop production. "You're limiting my ability to receive what I call a better nutrient source."



Brett Dickson tells Cameron Supervisor Robert Manley and other town board members that sewage sludge spreading is protected by the state's Right to Farm law.

Dickson's voice gradually rose and took a sharp edge as he defended the family's practices that he said were protected by the state's [Right to Farm Law](#). "Anything that I use as a soil amendment that is regulated by the state or federally, I can use under the Right to Farm law. I make my living at it."

Dickson's impassioned declaration triggered Michael Volino, who was recently named Thurston Town Supervisor.

"So is it OK to poison people's water?"

Volino said another state law, the recently enacted [Green Amendment](#), does not permit farmers to pollute the water wells of their neighbors.

"You know what. Go back to the f**kn' city, OK?" Dickson replied.

"I grew up in Thurston," Volino shot back.

Other sharp exchanges involved local residents and Casella officials Larry Shilling, a supervisor of landfills, and Mary Rayeski, division manager of the Bonny Hill Facility — Casella Organics' name for the Steuben County sludge spreading operation it hopes to take over.

Rayeski said Casella has a pending application to change the name on the state sludge permit from the Dicksons to Casella.

Last July, Casella bought or leased more than [2,700 acres](#) from the Dicksons. Rayeski said no municipal sludge has been imported or spread since those transactions. However, she acknowledged that some food waste sludge from existing lagoons was spread on fields in last Fall.

Shilling said Casella intended to discontinue importing and spreading food waste sludge. But he said the company hoped to add an important new source of municipal sewage sludge: the "[Bay Park Water Reclamation Facility](#)" in Queens, just east of JFK International Airport.

The Dickson permit allows it to import sludge from more than 20 sewage treatment plants — mainly in the Southern Tier, but also a few in Pennsylvania. The capacity of the Bay Park plant exceeds the combined capacity of all those smaller plants.

Tim Hargrave, a critic of the Dicksons who urged the Cameron board to vote to pass the proposed moratorium last night, said it appeared that the Bay Park business would allow Casella to double its municipal sludge spreading.

Shilling said that was not true. Not even close. Mostly likely, he said, Casella will use fewer trucks than the Dicksons did to import sludge.

Under questioning, Shilling estimated that Casella planned to import "six or seven" tractor trailer loads of sludge each day from Bay Park.

"So we're talking away food waste and replacing it with human waste?" asked one audience member, who branded the meeting "a complete s**tshow."

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has been reserved with the public about its procedures for analyzing Casella's application to assume the Dickson sludge spreading permit.

The DEC has neither responded to nor acknowledged a [March 7, 2023 letter](#) Volino sent to the agency requesting that a DEC representative attend a Thurston town meeting "to explain to us the permits and explain any proposals for modifications or transfers of these permits."

Volino noted in the letter that the Thurston Town Board had [enacted a moratorium](#) on permits for new or expanded waste operations in Thurston (identical to the moratorium Cameron is now considering).

"This moratorium applies ... to expansions of the land-spreading and other solid waste operations of (the Dicksons in Thurston)," Volino wrote.

Neither has the DEC provided all the Thurston permit applications sought under the Freedom of Information Law by the town's interim attorney, Rachel Treichler.

Treichler said she requested the applications and maps of the sludge spreading fields more than a month ago.

Spreading municipal sludge has gained national attention in recent months after [Maine entirely banned](#) the practice last year.



The sewage sludge spreading Casella plans in Steuben County would be illegal in Maine.

State officials there said soil, crops and livestock linked to fields spread with sewage sludge were contaminated with high levels of PFAS “forever chemicals.” Several dairy farms have been forced to close because the milk they produced was dangerously contaminated.

Casella officials acknowledged last night that the municipal sludge spreading they plan to conduct in Steuben County would be illegal in Maine. Other states are considering bans as well. New York doesn't require PFAS testing of sludge.

PFAS (per-and polyfluoroalkyl) compounds are man-made chemicals used in making Teflon, water-resistant clothing, cosmetics and many other commonly used items. They are highly toxic, they don't break down quickly and they have been linked to a wide range of health problems, including kidney cancer.

While the PFAS alarm is a relatively new development, many of the water wells surrounding the Dickson fields no longer produce safe drinking water.

Volino said most everyone he knows in the vicinity of Bonny Hill either hauls in purchased water or relies on expensive filtration systems.

"I am one of many that my water is no good," Mary Borhman said at Thurston's Town Board meeting in February. She said she and her deceased husband had ordered tests when it became undrinkable after the Dicksons applied sludge on a field only a few feet from their well.

She said that for years before her husband's death, he brought clean water home from work. Now she handles that chore.

"We had arsenic, barium, magnesium, manganese — heavy metals," she said.

The Sierra Club has sponsored tests for PFAS in water drawn from more than 30 water wells near the Dickson fields. The results are scheduled to be presented before Thurston's next Town Board meeting April 19.

Wayne Wells, a long-time critic of the Dickson sludge spreading operation, offered a cynical prediction.

"Once these PFAS chemicals are applied to the land, that land will at some point be toxic and it will not be able to be cleaned up," he said.

At that point, Wells added, the company "can step in and say, 'We're going to help out. We're going to contain the PFAS. We'll make a landfill out of it.' Mark my words."

Shilling, who supervises Casella's Hakes, Hyland and Ontario County landfills, insisted that the company has absolutely no plans to open a new landfill in Thurston or Cameron.

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Peter is a three-time Pulitzer nominated reporter covering environmental issues through his first-of-its-kind digital publication [The Water Front](#). He's won an array of Associated Press, UPI, and Society of Professional Journalist awards. His reporting on environmental issues continues to be featured in prominent New York publications and is available on FingerLakes1.com through an exclusive content partnership. Have a question or lead? Send it to peter@fingerlakes1.com.



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