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RAISING A STINK: Neighbors of site where hog waste sludge dumped express concerns over health, business, odor

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Toni Oliger of rural Rantoul said the odor is enough to make her sick.

Fellow country dweller Julie Hardy said the smell cost her business thousands of dollars last fall.

Mayor Chuck Smith is concerned that the stench will hurt business development on the village's west side.

And that doesn't take into account the potential health hazard.

The big stink is caused by hog waste sludge being applied to farm fields west of Rantoul from the Rantoul Foods pork plant.

Applying the sludge is an area farmer who is hauling away the pork plant material, spreading it and stockpiling it on fields along County Road 2900 N.

Julie Hardy, co-owner with husband Mark of Hardy's Reindeer Ranch, 1356 County Road 2900 N, said the farmer's applying sludge on a field across the road from the ranch last year cost them \$20,000 in business.

"Our problem was intense last fall," Hardy said. "What's really concerning is that he's not incorporating, not discing it in. Instead the farmer was broadcasting the sludge atop the ground. He did not return phone calls asking for comment.

The sludge reportedly can't be incorporated because it is too thick. A press at the hog plant removes the water from the waste, making it too thick to inject.

Hardy said many customers were holding their nose complaining of the odor. Many mistakenly thought the fault was that of the reindeer ranch.

This year the farmer has been stockpiling large amounts of the sludge in a wheat field south of the homes of Corrine Hemrich 1250 County Road 2900 N and Julie Hemrich and Toni Oliger. Corrine Hemrich, who has lived at her home since 1970, said she has a bad lung, and the odor is affecting her quality of life.

The situation took a new twist during the weekend when Saturday's heavy rains turned the field

into a river of sludge. The sludge reportedly flowed onto County Road 2900 N and into a nearby ditch.

“It’s just running all over the road,” Julie Hardy said. “We’re getting nowhere (with the EPA) with this. I’m beyond frustrated.”

Hemrich is concerned about the potential health effects.

“I’ve been through a lot in my life,” Hemrich said. “I’d hate to think that something like this smell would mess up my lung and put me in the hospital.”

Other rural residents also worry about the health aspect.

“The flies carry disease,” Olinger said. “It’s an environmental hazard, a health hazard. Does it have blood-borne pathogens? Does it have antibiotics from the pork they’ve butchered? Does it have feces in it? Does it have urine in it? The flies that are biting us, do they carry diseases?”

Olinger said no one can tell them what is being dumped in the fields.

“It’s going into the field tiles, which is going into your water supply,” she said.

Said Julie Hardy: “Even breathing this in can make you physically sick. I do consider this a health hazard to myself, my family, my customers.

“We want this stuff tested so we know what we’re dealing with. The EPA is being no help to us at all.”

Stacy James, a water resources scientist with the Champaign-based Prairie Rivers Network, a nonprofit statewide river conservation organization, said her group is concerned about what is being dumped on the fields.

James said Rantoul Foods has “a water pollution control permit from the Illinois EPA, and it does allow for offsite interim storage of dried sludge ... for two months.”

“The permit says, ‘Measures shall be taken to contain runoff and leachate from any dried sludge that is stored,’” James said.

According to James, the company is in violation of its permit because it does not appear to be containing the leachate (that material that runs off into the water) if it’s a tile-drained field. They should also have some sort of pad and cover this so it’s not open to the elements.”

James said the farmer is legally able to broadcast the sludge rather than inject it into the ground because the ground slope in his fields is less than 8 percent, “but they need to be applying the waste at what is considered an agronomic rate.”

James said the Prairie Rivers Network is applying pressure on the Illinois EPA to require Rantoul Foods to create adequate sludge storage.

She said in speaking with EPA officials, their reaction has been, “They have inspected the site a few times in the last week, and they were the ones who informed me that stockpiling is allowed

for up to two months. I know this issue has now reached the Springfield office, so they are discussing it at a higher level now.”

James said Rantoul Foods received a violation notice from the EPA last fall for odor and entered into a compliance commitment agreement in which the company agreed to add additional acreage for land application.

Andrew Mason, Illinois EPA spokesman, said the agency is monitoring the situation.

Mason said the pork plant sludge “has been treated. All the water goes through a treatment plant. All the sludge has been dewatered.

“This is livestock waste,” Mason said. “This kind of thing is common (in the country). We’ve been out there several times and are monitoring it. We’re determining what the next course of action is, if there is any.”

Julie Pryde, director of Champaign-Urbana Public Health, said her department has been approached about the issue, but noted, “This is an EPA issue right now. Hog poop is an issue with EPA. If it’s human waste, it would be Public Health.”

She said any time fecal matter is involved, whether airborne or not, there is potential for disease.

“It certainly has the potential for having public health problems,” Pryde said. “It just doesn’t appear that it has yet.”

Pryde said if anyone becomes ill from what they believe could be caused by the sludge, they should first go to a physician and then report it to the health department.

Doug Rokke, also of rural Rantoul, said he was at Corrine Hemrich’s home when the farmer dumped another load of sludge in the field Thursday afternoon, and the odor became unbearable. He said he became nauseated.

James Jendruczek, president of Rantoul Foods, said the farmer has indicated to him that he has been putting lime on the sludge to reduce the odor.

“He told me it was good” at reducing the smell, Jendruczek said.

“The EPA came out, and everything John’s done has been correct. He has all his permits. Everything he’s done is correct.

“He’s assured us that everything is correct. We talked to the EPA that everything he said is right, and they verified.”

Jendruczek said Hardys Reindeer Ranch has a pile of reindeer manure that produces odor, and said the Hardys are getting the neighbors “all stirred up.”

Rantoul Foods slaughters an average of 3,800 hogs per day and employs 340 people.

Oliger and the Hardys said the farmer will put lime on the sludge for a day or two after people complain and then stop doing it.

Mark Hardy said if the farmer would inject the sludge into the ground it would cut the odor by 80 percent.

The Hardys are also concerned about the health of their reindeer. They said the number of flies has increased dramatically as a result of the sludge deposits.

Mark Hardy showed a long fly strip in a barn on his father, Richard's, farm where some of the reindeer are being kept. The strip was covered with flies.

Hardy said he used to have to change the strip every four days or so. Now he has to change it every day. He also tries to keep the flies off the reindeer by running a fan and by spraying them with fly spray.

The issue isn't just a rural one.

Rantoul Mayor Smith said he and Village Administrator Bruce Sandahl had met with Jendruczek recently to discuss the situation.

"We made him aware of the problem," Smith said. "He said he felt there was something that they could do and would look into it as soon as he got back into the plant.

"He said he wants to be a good neighbor. He wants to help."

But at a later meeting, Jendruczek informed them that not much could be done.

"I'm not saying it's the pork plant's problem," Smith said. "The neighbors have been complaining and asking the village to intercede."

The pork plant is within village limits, but the village has no control over the farmer's sludge disposal practices.

"(The farmer) is outside of our authority," Smith said. "We ... asked (the farmer) to treat (the waste) that is spread on his field. We asked (Jendruczek) if he would mind spreading some lime on it in the (pork plant) to cut down on the stench before he ever allowed (the farmer) to purchase it."

Smith said Jendruczek indicated he would prefer the farmer spread the lime on it after he got it.

"He told me he wasn't sure that the lime would work," Smith said.

Rantoul's west side is under development with announced plans for a new motel, senior living units and perhaps other new business near Wal-Mart. Smith is concerned the odor might give potential developers second thoughts.

"Our west side is trying to be developed," Smith said. "We're concerned if there will be a drift into the west side of our town.

"It's a grave concern to us about what's happening."

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