

EPA plans new guidance on 'forever chemicals' in sewage sludge

By Miranda Willson

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The Trump administration is developing new guidance on “forever chemicals” in sewage sludge fertilizer to correct for deficiencies in a Biden-era report on the topic, a senior EPA official said Thursday.

The guidance will help inform people of their risk of exposure to the toxic chemicals in a way that is “clear and transparent and upfront,” said Jess Kramer, the head of the agency's water office.

Widely used to nourish rangelands, golf courses and agricultural fields, fertilizer derived from sewage sludge can act as a vector for dispersing “forever chemicals,” a range of synthetic substances known for their extreme persistence in the environment. Under the Biden administration, EPA found that [use of sludge](#) on family farms could pose risks to farmers and to people drinking from nearby sources of water.

That draft report was the first instance of the agency acknowledging contamination risks and was seen as a starting point toward regulations. But the findings caused significant confusion for states and water and wastewater utilities, Kramer said during a conference organized by the Vessel Collective, a coalition of water and sanitation groups.

In addition, the assessment failed to model scenarios that occur “in real life,” Kramer said in a brief follow-up interview. EPA's forthcoming new guidance will be “easy to understand for somebody like a mom with little kids who's playing outside, to be able to pick it up say, ‘OK, these are things that I should be thinking about. And these are the actual scenarios where maybe there's an increased risk if you land apply ... biosolids,’” she continued.

Formally known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances or PFAS, “forever chemicals” have been used for decades to make products stain-repellent and resistant to water and heat. Some versions are strongly linked to cancer, fertility issues, thyroid disease and a weakened immune system, among other ailments.

Routinely present in municipal wastewater, PFAS are now being found in sewage sludge, a nutrient-rich, semisolid material derived from treatment plants and sold as fertilizer. Repeated use of PFAS-tainted sludge has been blamed for polluting water or farmland in states like Maine, Pennsylvania and [North Carolina](#).

The problem has garnered the attention of Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., [who cast doubt last year](#) on the safety of sewage sludge land application. Some states have also begun testing for PFAS in sludge or cracking down on land application.

Still, there are no federal regulations requiring that sewage sludge — also known as biosolids — be tested for PFAS. Environmental advocates and individuals affected by contamination say that needs to change, but EPA does not appear to be moving in that direction.

“There are absolutely scenarios where, if you're using biosolids laden with PFOA and PFOS, there are likely increased health risks,” Kramer said. “We as the EPA, if we're going to talk about that, we should be extremely explicit about what actual scenarios that happens in.”