

# Dumping on Farmers

## The Toxic Waste in Fertilizer Story

Steel mills, paper mills, and other major polluting industries are turning their waste into fertilizer which is spread onto food-producing lands. As a result, poisons such as **lead, cadmium, arsenic, and dioxins** wind up in fertilizer products used for farms and backyard gardens.

This practice has been going on for several decades but went unnoticed by the general public and virtually unregulated by the government. A group of determined farmers and then-Mayor Patty Martin in Quincy, Washington discovered this unbelievable practice when they were searching for answers for failed crops and dying livestock. What the farmers and mayor eventually helped to uncover for the nation was that it is a common practice for toxic wastes from major industrial polluters to be made into fertilizer.

Industries have long seen fertilizer as a cheap way to dispose of their wastes, but when the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act was passed in 1976, Congress reinforced the practice and unfortunately encouraged it. The law promotes recycling whenever possible. After rules were finalized that granted a large loophole for certain wastes and “recycled” fertilizer products, polluting industries saw an even greater opportunity to dispose of their wastes cheaply and with few federal regulations.

There are a number of ways toxic waste winds up in fertilizer, including:

- Large industries that produce cement, metals, and wood products turn the toxic by-products of their manufacturing processes into fertilizer.
- Toxic waste is collected from pollution-control equipment in smokestacks and made into fertilizer.
- Some industries pay farmers to take waste directly and spread it on their farms.



No thorough study has ever been done to determine whether adding wastes to fertilizer could be a safe method of disposal. Limited testing that has been done on fertilizer products shows that they often contain the highly toxic heavy metals lead, cadmium, and arsenic, as well as dioxins. Steel smelter waste contains as much as one percent lead and 800 parts per trillion dioxins.

Exposure to toxic metals, dioxins and other chemicals in fertilizers is a health concern for farmworkers and farmers who handle these products, workers who manufacture fertilizers, communities where these products are applied, and consumers who eat the food grown with these products.

The buildup of metals and other contaminants in agricultural soils may cause crop damage, contamination of groundwater or surface water, and the contamination of food. Lead, cadmium, arsenic, and dioxins are all harmful to children and adults at low doses and they persist in the environment.

Public interest groups including the Washington Toxics Coalition are calling for:

- An immediate halt to the practice of adding toxic wastes to fertilizer. Certain types of waste, such as cement kiln dusts, pulp mill and other wastes that contain dioxins and are clearly not appropriate for use as fertilizer. There is no evidence that other wastes are safe to apply as fertilizer.

- Full disclosure of the contents of all fertilizers, for both nutritive elements and non-nutritive constituents.
- Standards based on non-degradation for all fertilizers, to protect our soils for the future.

Government officials must act immediately to protect health and the environment. We cannot allow further contamination of farmland and further toxic exposures for farmers, farmworkers and consumers, while government agencies study and discuss the problem, determining whether there may be a few instances where waste in fertilizer is both safe and beneficial.

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**Right now, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is considering a proposal to regulate some toxic wastes in fertilizer. Please take a moment to help stop this scam by writing a letter.**

#### Sample Letter

Christine T Whitman  
1101A  
USEPA Headquarters  
Ariel Rios Building  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.  
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Ms. Whitman:

Steel mills, paper mills, and other major polluting industries are turning their waste into fertilizer, which is spread onto food-producing lands. As a result, poisons such as lead, cadmium, arsenic, and dioxins wind up in fertilizer products used for farms and backyard gardens. This is a cheap but dangerous way for industries to dispose of their toxic wastes on our food supply and it must be stopped.

I urge you to strengthen the proposed fertilizer rule in the following ways:

- *Keep toxic waste out of our food supply by banning toxic waste in fertilizer, especially wastes containing dioxin.*
- *As an interim step, adopt stringent standards for metals in fertilizers and close loopholes that give special treatment to mining waste and steel mill waste.*
- *All fertilizers should be fully labeled with the actual levels of contaminants, and EPA should establish a comprehensive tracking system for all wastes going to fertilizer.*

Also, please support standards for all fertilizers based on keeping our soils clean for future generations. Fertilizers should be cleaner than dirt!

Sincerely,

The Washington Toxics Coalition is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting public health and the environment by identifying and promoting alternatives to toxic chemicals. Write or phone for information: WTC, 4649 Sunnyside Ave N, Suite 540, Seattle, WA 98103. 206-632-1545. Visit our Web site at [www.watoxics.org](http://www.watoxics.org).