

## HOW SLOP FROM NATURAL GAS FRACKING COULD END UP IN YOUR FOOD<sup>1</sup>

Leah Zerbe<sup>©</sup>

Sewage sludge, a common farm fertilizer banned in organic farming, could be laced with toxic chemicals from natural gas drilling.

Here's an unappetizing reality of our food production system: Today's farming practices include the application of sewage sludge (muck that's left over after wastewater is treated); it can be sprayed all over food crops and on the crops grown for animals that we go on to eat. This practice in and of itself is causing problems with soil contamination, and is even blamed for "farm deaths" down South. But now, there's a new addition to the toxic burden of the sludge as a result of the race to build thousands of natural gas drilling wells across the country.

This "fracking" (hydraulic fracturing) technology is all over the news for creating pollution, such as flammable, methane-laced tap water; explosions in state forests, air pollution; and a laundry list of other ills. Now food contamination (through sewage sludge, air pollution, and leaks) and farm destruction are on the growing list of potential fracking problems. "On the Marcellus Shale issue, there's been an underwhelming response by elected officials to look out for the health and safety of our citizens," says sewage sludge expert Darree Sicher, founder of the United Sludge-Free Alliance. She's especially passionate about keeping fracking out of the Delaware River watershed in the East, which supplies clean water to New York City and Philadelphia—nearly 16 million people. "Don't live over the shale? Doesn't matter," she says. "Forty percent of the U.S. population is within a one-day drive of Pennsylvania and the Delaware River."

**THE DETAILS:** There's no doubt some of the harmful elements found in sludge wind up *in* (not just on) our food. A group of scientists with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently studied 26 farms in Virginia that had been treated with sludge (the industry prefers the more benign-sounding term "biosolids) and found that it takes more than a year for triclosan, a harmful antimicrobial chemical found in antibacterial soaps, toothpaste, and products marketed as being treated with Microban, to break down in the soil. During that year, farmers are growing food crops in antibacterial-laced soil, thanks to the triclosan that washes down our drains and ends up in sewage sludge. Two other 2010 studies found that plants actually take up shampoo chemicals and harmful antibacterial agents.

**WHAT IT MEANS:** On top of the already toxic mix found in sewage sludge, there's the potential for wastewater-treatment plants to process fracking fluid, which includes more than 200 chemicals (many neurotoxic and hormone disruptors; some carcinogens). Not to mention the possibility of harmful heavy metals, some radioactive, coming up with the fracking wastewater from deep in the earth. Most contaminants would go undetected: The EPA requires the testing of only nine elements in sewage sludge. And while landfills test for radioactive elements in sludge they receive, the sludge some conventional farmers dump on our food fields is not tested for this, explains Sicher, who notes that 65 percent of sludge in this country goes to land use like farming, or is bagged and sold or given away as compost or fertilizer.

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<sup>1</sup> Rodale Daily News, September 27, 2010

**Here's how to protect our food chain from harmful chemicals.**

**Demand organic:** Join the Demand Organic movement to preserve the soil that supplies us with healthy food. Sludge is banned in organic agriculture, as are chemical pesticides that can be taken up in the plants we eat.

**Force the FRAC Act support:** Demand that your federal legislators support the FRAC Act, which would at least restore some of the public-health laws that the natural gas industry is currently exempt from following. If there's drilling in your state, form a community group, just as the Damascus Citizens have done in Pennsylvania.

Also, the Energy Justice Network is a grassroots organization that helps local groups threatened by polluting energy and waste technologies to develop a plan of action to keep their communities safe.

**Be wary of what you put down the drain:** Ideally, this country would follow in the steps of European countries and separate human waste from industrial and hospital waste. But in the interim, select the products you use to clean and bathe carefully because they can wind up in the next (nonorganic) tomato you eat!