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## Firm Ordered to Stop Spreading Sewage Sludge

By Sharon Bernstein

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Bio Gro, the firm that has proposed trucking sewage sludge to the High Desert and composting it for use as fertilizer, was dealt a setback this week when state water regulators ordered it to cease current operations.

The Oakland firm, whose proposal for a 67-acre composting facility is scheduled to come before the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday, was told to stop spreading sludge from L.A.'s Hyperion sewage plant on a farm near Lancaster, where the mixture is used in its wet, uncomposted form to fertilize fields.

In a letter dated April 17 and received by the company this week, the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board gave the company until June 15 to submit a plan for avoiding water pollution from the sewage, which was washed from the fields during flooding from last winter's rains.

"The ranch was inundated by flood water during February's storm event, resulting in runoff," said Harold J. Singer, executive officer of the Lahontan board. "There is a continued threat of violations until Bio Gro institutes adequate flood control measures."

The proposal to build a composting facility—which would take in 500 tons of treated sewage and 1,000 tons of other waste each day—has sparked strong opposition from neighbors and local officials, including County Supervisor Mike Antonovich, who represents the area.

Opponents contend that baking sewage in the desert sun and turning it periodically into compost would lead to air pollution and odor problems as the strong High Desert winds blow the drying waste toward nearby homes.

The plan has drawn fire from local air quality officials, as well as neighbors and the city of Lancaster.

The latest action by the water board, which last month cited Bio Gro both for allowing the flooding and failing to report it, marks a second black eye for the proposal, which until recently was considered a shoe-in despite Antonovich's opposition.

It was not clear Friday whether the supervisors would go forward or delay action until the water issues are resolved. The vote on the composting plan—originally scheduled for last month—has already been put off once

because of concerns about water pollution.

The proposal was turned down by the Regional Planning Commission, but Bio Gro appealed to the county supervisors last year. The board voted last summer to approve the project in concept, but final approval was delayed after last winter's flood problems.

"This issue that came up has thrown a little confusion on it," said William Cotter, vice president and general manager for the Bio Gro Division of Wheelabrator Water Technologies.

Still, Cotter said, most of the supervisors continue to express support for the project.

"They're looking at it as another potential outlet for recycling and handling some of their organic wastes and diverting it from the landfill," Cotter said. "We still expect the [positive] vote that we would have expected last month."

Cotter said the company plans to address the water board's concerns about its present operations by digging a ditch or building a berm around the fields where the sludge is spread.

"We've agreed to work with [water quality regulators] to find a solution, and we expect it to be a very quick solution," Cotter said.

The fields won't need to be fertilized again, Cotter said, until June, and by then the company hopes to have permission to start work again.

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