

# Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

## Beware of brown snow

Talk about difficult public relations jobs. How would you like the task of trying to convince a bunch of city-bred suburbanites they should really appreciate the smell of fresh cow manure being spread on farmland?

That's exactly the task Lee Cordner, a University of Vermont waste management specialist, took on. He issued a news release recently telling Vermonters that cow manure doesn't really smell all that bad, that a lot of farmers only spread a couple of times a year, and besides that — what else are Vermont farmers going to do

with 3.8 million tons of that aromatic material?

Cordner points out dairy producers who are doing a really good job of manure management spread the stuff very seldom. In between times, it's stored in smell-proof containers. In that way, Cordner says the farmer is maximizing the nutritional value derived from the manure and is eliminating runoff that could pollute nearby streams and lakes.

"If a farmer were to spread manure every day of the year, some days it would have to spread in the rain or on the snow. The

manure then could be washed away and nutrients could go into the water where they fertilize unwanted algae."

The specialist also eludes to a particularly messy problem for Vermonters — that of cross-country skiing on fields where cow manure has been spread. "Beware of brown snow," he cautions.

Cordner goes on to point out the special advantage of cow manure even if it doesn't smell too good. It does contain important nutrients that would otherwise be replaced with expensive commercial fertilizers that consume energy in their production.

According to the waste management specialist, it would take the equivalent of 47 gallons of gasoline to replace the nutrients that are produced by just one cow each year. And in Vermont where there are 190,000 cows, that figures out to a saving of 8.9 million gallons of gasoline.

Of course, all that doesn't change the smell of cow manure, but there are some things dairy producers can do to lessen the problem, according to Cordner. Having an on-farm storage tank is the first step. Then he's suggesting producers should only spread manure when conditions are right — that means a low relative humidity, high winds, clear sunny weather, and soils that are not frozen and are dry enough to work. He says he thinks farmers should

incorporate their manure into the soil when it's spread, or immediately afterwards, and he says he feels the best time to spread is in the morning when the air is warming and rising.

And, of course, there are the obvious problems to avoid — like spreading when the wind is blowing towards the neighbor's place, or toward populated areas or heavily traveled highways, or just before weekends or holidays, when neighbors are apt to be outside.

Some dairy operations smell bad all the time and some are barely noticeable, and Cordner says he thinks it has a lot to do with the management technique of the dairy producers. Some farmers don't seem to care about manure smells, suggesting only that city folk who move to the country should expect that. And if they don't like it, they should move back to town.

But times are changing and more and more urbanites are moving to the country and they're bringing with them some environmental standards. Usually the fragrant smell of freshly spread cow manure, wafting over fields and meadows, is not included in their acceptability tolerance.

Cordner says farmers faced with such purists, who insist on com-

plaining every time the honey wagon heads for the field, can do some other things to cure their odor problems. But they're expensive. These include pumping oxygen into manure storage areas, dehydrating the manure mechanically, and adding chemicals which must be applied in large amounts.

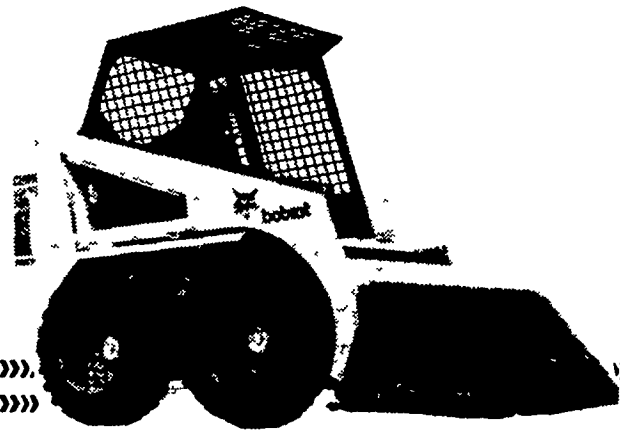
Another solution may be in the production of biogas. A successful biogas generator is already in operation on a farm near Gettysburg. These units are odor-free, and they supply methane gas which can be used on the farm as an energy source.

So maybe Cordner hasn't convinced too many rural residents that they should enjoy the fragrance of cow manure. But he does present an overwhelming reality — what else are farmers going to do with it? After all, it is a very natural process and there just isn't any way to shut it down.

Deodorizing is expensive, impractical, probably environmentally unsafe. On the other hand, the time-honored system of manure storage and distribution benefits the environment, saves energy, helps protect our food supply, and does create an occasional bad smell.

Maybe it's a trade-off that

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