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## B City & State

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# Hog waste trials funded

Grant may lead to useful byproducts

Wade Rawlins, Staff Writer

Hog waste may actually be a marketable commodity.

A \$750,000 grant announced Wednesday by Environmental Defense and a contract farmers group will be used to help develop and evaluate markets for selling byproducts of innovative hog- waste treatments such as fertilizer, compost and soil additives.

State transportation officials have agreed to take up to 6,000 cubic yards of compost from one treatment process to use for erosion control near road construction and to apply on wildflower beds along highways.

"Our department has always been an advocate of new technologies," said Derek Smith, a vegetation management supervisor with the Department of Transportation. "Anything we can do environmentally, we want to be a player in. If it weren't for this grant, we wouldn't be able to afford this product."

North Carolina is the nation's second-largest pork producer. Its 10 million swine are concentrated on 2,600 farms, many of them factory operations in rural counties east and south of Raleigh. The farms produce huge volumes of manure and urine, which are flushed from barns into open-air waste ponds, creating concerns about odors, air emissions and pollution of waterways.

A six-year research effort led by N.C. State University has identified five innovative methods of treating the waste as environmentally preferable to the existing waste lagoons. But the new technologies are expensive. Research shows they appear to cost two to five times as much as using lagoons and spraying liquid onto field as fertilizer.

This effort aims to make the technologies more economically attractive by identifying markets for byproducts.

One method involves worm composting of hog manure to produce fertilizer. Grant money will be used to construct a building and shallow trenches on a farm owned by Chuck Stokes, creating the right conditions for worms to convert hog



At Sarem Farms in Gates County, waste is funneled from pigs' quarters, in the background, to a lagoon where it bubbles up. When the solid waste is broken down into a liquid, it is processed and sprayed on fields at the farm.

Staff File Photo

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manure to fertilizer. The end product is used as a soil additive for gardening.

"There are motivated farmers out here who are willing to explore new technologies, but they need some seed money to make the transition," said Stokes, an Ayden hog farmer and co-founder of Frontline Farmers, the contract farmer's group.

A second process, called Super Soils Systems, involves flushing waste from barns into tanks, where solids and liquids are separated. The solids are trucked off for use as fertilizer. The liquids are processed through a series of metal tanks to remove nitrogen and phosphorus. Most of the wastewater is recycled for flushing the barn, and the rest is used to irrigate fields.

"I feel development of viable markets is absolutely critical," said Mike Williams, a professor at N.C. State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences who will oversee project evaluations. "Whether this is a turning point will depend on what our work shows. It could be a turning point."

Environmental groups want to maintain the momentum toward widespread installation of new, cleaner waste systems at industrial hog farms begun by an agreement six years ago with major hog producers.

In 2000, Smithfield Foods and Premium Standard Farms agreed with the state to fund research on treatment technologies. The agreement required the companies to switch to the new disposal system when researchers identified methods that were both environmentally superior and economically feasible.

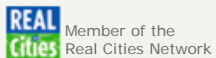
"To me, this is a major turning point," Dan Whittle, an attorney for Environmental Defense, said when announcing the grant. "This is the point at which we stop studying and start acting."

State Rep. Carolyn Justice of Hampstead in Pender County has proposed legislation for \$10 million in state tax dollars to subsidize farmers who switch early to a new technology. Justice said the grant, half of which came from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was a signal that North Carolina was on the right track.

Julie Woodson, a spokeswoman for the N.C. Pork Council, which represents the swine industry, opposes Justice's bill advocating conversion of farms.

"We want to make sure anything put on farms is economically feasible and environmentally superior," Woodson said. "There is concern that if we move forward with technologies that don't meet those criteria, you'll end up with byproducts that are not marketable."

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