

European Commission to Send Warning Letter to Sweden, Belgium, Ireland, Italy and Portugal on Sewage Sludge

The European Commission has decided to send a letter of formal notice (first warning letter) to Sweden, Belgium, Ireland, Italy and Portugal for non-respect of the Community's Sewage Sludge Directive. This Directive provides for quality controls on sewage sludge that is used in agriculture, in particular to avoid the build-up of heavy metals in soil. It also provides for a system of record-keeping enabling controls. The decisions taken relate to failures of the above mentioned Member States to provide adequate information on sewage sludge disposal and/or to ensure an adequate system of records.

Commenting on the decisions, Environment commissioner Margot Wallström said: "It is vital to protect and enhance the quality of our food. We need to be sure that we have the right information and effective controls on the use of sewage sludge in agriculture. Some Member States clearly need to improve the information they collect and transmit to the Commission."

The Sewage Sludge Directive (Council Directive 86/278/EEC on the protection of the environment, and in particular of the soil, when sewage sludge is used in agriculture) requires Member States to submit to the Commission every three years certain information on the use of sewage sludge. This includes for example the quantity of sludge produced and used in agriculture as well as its contents (concentrations of heavy metals and nutrients).

The information for 1995-1997 was due on 30 September 1998. Following infringement procedures against those Member States that failed to report on time, many Member States submitted the required information. However, in some cases the information provided was incomplete. In other cases, it revealed that the provisions of the Directive had not been correctly carried over into national law. In particular, some Member States were not monitoring the use of sludge as required by the Directive.

As a result, the Commission has decided to launch a concerted procedure for all the Member States concerned. This reflects the importance the Commission attaches to adequate monitoring and information on the use of sewage sludge. As plants take up heavy metals from the soil, it must be checked before starting land-spreading operations whether the concentrations of heavy metals in sludge do not exceed the threshold limits laid down in legislation. Land use planning may also be affected by a lack of knowledge about how much sludge is produced and how much of it is used in agriculture or disposed of in other ways.

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