



Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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Fall dairy inspections seek to prevent winter manure spills

OLYMPIA – As dairy farmers prepare for the upcoming fall and winter rains, WSDA inspectors are working to prevent environmental damage to drinking water aquifers, freshwater habitats and Puget Sound.

The fall assessments check whether manure lagoons across the state are ready for the rainy season. Typically, dairies use the contents of their lagoons to fertilize their fields. The sweeps raise the awareness of dairy operators to the importance of having their waste storage lagoons empty and in good condition for the winter.

“These preventive inspections are an important environmental protection measure,” said Nora Mena, manager of WSDA’s Livestock Nutrient Management Program. “While the majority of our dairy farmers are ready for the wet winter months, this sweep gives us a chance to provide technical assistance to farmers before field applications of manure become too risky. They say you should make hay while the sun is shining, and the same goes for fertilizing your fields.”

WSDA inspects all licensed dairies for appropriate manure management on a regular 22-month cycle. The fall sweeps are in addition to the regular inspections, as well as any WSDA emergency response to an unlawful or accidental waste discharge from a dairy farm. WSDA can issue penalties of up to \$10,000 for spills.

WSDA is responsible for supervising the dairy’s compliance with its nutrient management plan, which is developed and approved by local conservation districts. The state Department of Ecology is responsible for administering the federal Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations permit held by certain dairies that have had discharges to streams or groundwater.

This marks the fourth year that WSDA inspectors have conducted proactive lagoon inspections in the fall. Nearly 100 dairies across the state are included in the sweep, with a focus on those that may have a higher risk of a discharge event or are located where a discharge would have greater consequences. Dairies in areas that have experienced water quality problems and those near shellfish beds are given higher priority.

Dairies are notified of the fall inspection in advance and are urged to make proper field applications to lower the level of manure in their holding lagoons before the inspection. The inspectors assess the condition of the lagoon dikes, the level of waste in the lagoon and the amount of solids accumulating in the lagoon. Doing the assessments early in the fall gives an operator time to address any identified problems.

Full waste storage ponds create a potential to pollute state waters. Full ponds may overflow and create unsafe dike conditions. They may also lead producers to make risky wet-weather applications that run off to drainage ditches, streams or other surface waters.

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Inspectors will follow up and monitor the management of the most serious issues identified during the sweep to ensure that they are remedied. Of the 84 dairies visited during the sweep last year, more than two-thirds had no issues identified. Last year, six dairies required follow-up visits.

While there are environmental consequences of the mismanagement of dairy waste, such as excessive aquatic plant growth, fish kills and reduced water quality, farms regard the manure and other byproducts of dairy production as an asset. Most farms use the manure's nitrogen and phosphorus to improve the productivity of their own cropland, but many are exploring other value-added opportunities, such as bagged compost for home garden use and energy generation.

Two innovative dairies have begun to sell electricity generated from captured methane created by the decomposition of cow manure in anaerobic digesters. The digesters in Whatcom and Yakima counties are currently sending electricity to the grid to power neighboring homes and businesses. The state provided matching funds of nearly \$2 million in low-interest loans to help build the Sunnyside digester. Two more digesters in Skagit and Snohomish counties are in planning and development stages.

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