

Report on the Primary Industries Standing Committee  
(PISC) National Cadmium Workshop, Werribee,  
14th February 2002

Daryl Stevens

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Enquiries should be addressed to:

Dr Daryl Stevens

CSIRO

PMB 2

Glen Osmond

SA 5064

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# **Report on the Primary Industries Standing Committee (PISC) National Cadmium Workshop, Werribee, (14<sup>th</sup> February 2002)**

## **Attendees**

See attached list.

## **Discussion notes**

The NCMC requested that this meeting be convened as cadmium inputs from all sources have to be considered in agricultural production systems if food quality is to be protected now and in the future.

At present, cadmium concentrations in fertilisers are regulated, and uniformity exists (or is currently being effected) between the Australian States.

Some guidelines are available for biosolids, but these vary between States. Biosolids, given their low analysis, and the rates at which they are applied, are unlikely to be traded across State borders, as fertilisers are. Quality of organic wastes/fertilisers are also not controlled to the same extent as inorganic fertilisers or biosolids, and significant loading of Cd to soil may therefore result (e.g. Sydney basin study of Jinadasa et al. 1997).

Guidelines are not available for organic wastes, so the guidelines for biosolids are often applied, though these are not always appropriate. At present a draft standard for composts and soil conditioners was being redrafted by Standards Australia, and this includes recommendations that Cd concentrations not exceed National biosolids guidelines. However, there is no necessity for producers to comply with the Australian Standard. A major concern is that high rates of application of fertiliser complying with National biosolids guidelines results in large Cd additions to soil.

Agreement was reached that the individual States should set loading limits for cadmium in biosolids. Each State will review its standards. Proposed guidelines are:

Biosolids should not be applied to agricultural land with cadmium concentrations above 0.5 or 1.0 mg/kg Cd, unless local data indicates lower limits should be applied. The critical values may be related to soil pH, the lower limit applying to acid or saline soils.

The maximum annual cadmium loading for agricultural soils to be set at 30g/ha/yr Cd, averaged over 5 years, i.e. a total of 150 g/ha Cd over 5 years. 30 g/ha/yr Cd is the amount of cadmium that would be applied in an inorganic fertiliser containing 300 mg Cd/kg P (the maximum permissible under current legislation) at 100 kg/ha P (a rate which is used on intensive dairy pastures and in vegetables when grown on soils with a high phosphorus fixation capacity).

Violations of food standards for Cd may occur on soils low in Cd, e.g. wheat in parts of southern Australia, and peanuts on sandy soils in Queensland at soil concentrations as low as 0.2 mg/kg Cd.

It was agreed that 30 g/ha/yr Cd was not sustainable in the long term, but it allows Cd inputs to be capped, as an interim measure, pending further investigation.

While Cd is a major concern to us in the fertiliser industry, it is unlikely to be the driver in all cases for setting maximum rates at which biosolids can be applied. The frequency and rate at which biosolids are applied is normally dictated by other factors, i.e. nutrients (nitrogen and

phosphorus) or copper in South Australia. However, some treatment works with high Cd biosolids may still have agricultural reuse limited by Cd.

In South Australia, biosolids cannot be used on irrigated soils. Salinity is common in irrigated areas, and chloride (Cl) has been shown to mobilise cadmium (Cd), increasing its availability for plant root uptake.

By paying attention to industrial sites/disposal of trade wastes, Cd concentrations in biosolids have been reduced considerably over the past decade or so, e.g. in some treatment works from above 10 mg/kg Cd down to 1 - 3 mg/kg Cd at the present time in biosolids derived primarily from domestic sources. The scope for further reductions below these levels may be restricted. However, some treatment works with mainly domestic origin waste are still producing biosolids above these levels. Apart from human excrement (i.e. cadmium derived from the food we consume in our diets), other sources of Cd are (possibly) toothpaste, soap and shampoos. Traceback of sources of Cd in biosolids would be beneficial to indicate where trade waste policies need to be altered. The issue of data quality assurance in relation to analytical accuracy is important at low Cd concentrations, and the Australasian Soil and Plant Analysis Council will be encouraged to establish an analytical quality assurance program for organic wastes.

While loading of soils with Cd from biosolids application can be controlled through State guidelines, there is still a need to consider how Cd additions in other organic wastes/fertilisers can be minimised.

Other issues with biosolids and organic wastes are odours and pathogens.

## Agreement and recommendations

The meeting agreed that cadmium in wastes/biosolids should be controlled as follows (action for States, NCMC and industry to consider):

- Controls at source (i.e. trade waste policies). Traceback of Cd in biosolids in treatment works with high Cd concentrations to determine where additional controls are needed on influent concentrations;
- Maximum annual loading rate of 30g/ha/yr averaged over 5 years (150g/ha/5yr);
- Maximum soil concentration 1.0 mg/kg, unless local data indicate lower limit;
- Biosolid cadmium grading – national guideline to be adopted (when finalised);
- Research to suggest soil/biosolid bioavailability index & sustainability system;
- An analytical quality assurance program be encouraged through the Australasian Soil and Plant Analysis Council; and
- Controls on Cd in wastes other than biosolids to be considered e.g. other animal and urban wastes and composts.

## References

Jinadasa KBPN, Milham PJ, Hawkins CA, Cornish PS, Williams PA, Kaldor CJ, Conroy JP (1997) Survey of cadmium concentrations in vegetables and soils of Greater Sydney, Australia. *Journal of Environmental Quality* **26**, 924-933.

## List of Attendees

Glenn Barry  
Senior Chemist  
Department of Natural Resources  
Natural Science Precinct  
Block B, 80 Meiers Rd., Indooroopilly Brisbane 4068  
07 3896 9306  
07 3896 9591  
[Glenn.Barry@dnr.qld.gov.au](mailto:Glenn.Barry@dnr.qld.gov.au)

Ross Brennan  
Plant Nutritionist - Nutrient Management  
Agriculture Western Australia  
444 Albany Highway  
Albany  
WA 6330  
098 928 474  
098 412 707  
[rbrennan@agric.wa.gov.au](mailto:rbrennan@agric.wa.gov.au)

Austin Brown  
State Chemistry Laboratory  
Department of Natural Resources and Environment  
621 Sneydes Road  
Werribee Victoria 3030  
Australia  
(03) 9742 8728  
(03) 9742 8700  
0407 812 771  
[austin.brown@nre.vic.gov.au](mailto:austin.brown@nre.vic.gov.au)

Lindsay Cook  
Chief, Division of Plant Industries  
NSW Agriculture  
Locked Bag 21  
Orange  
NSW 2800  
02 6391 3146  
02 6391 3508  
0427 311415  
[lindsay.cook@agric.nsw.gov.au](mailto:lindsay.cook@agric.nsw.gov.au)

Garry Davies  
WA Department of Environmental Protection  
PO Box K822  
Perth  
WA 6842  
08 9222 7060  
[garry.davies@environ.wa.gov.au](mailto:garry.davies@environ.wa.gov.au)

Rick Desmier  
Senior Engineer  
United Water International Pty Ltd  
180 Greenhill Rd Parkside  
South Australia 5063  
61 8 8301 2832  
61 8 8357 9728  
0419 805 618  
[rick.desmier@uwi.com.au](mailto:rick.desmier@uwi.com.au)

David Dettrick  
BEng (Civil)  
Environmental Officer  
Waste Management and Community Section  
Dept. of Environment and Land Management  
134 Macquarie Street  
GPO Box 44A, Hobart, 7001  
Tasmania, Australia  
(03) 6233 3601  
(03) 6233 3800  
[davidd@delm.tas.gov.au](mailto:davidd@delm.tas.gov.au)

David Duncan  
Principal Water Quality Adviser  
Environment Protection Agency  
Level 6 77 Grenfell Street Adelaide  
GPO Box 2607 Adelaide  
(08) 8204 2094  
(08) 8204 2107  
[duncan.david@saugov.sa.gov.au](mailto:duncan.david@saugov.sa.gov.au)

Allen Gale  
Director, Technical Services  
Goulburn Valley Water  
03 5832 0444  
03 5831 1467  
0418 577 740  
[alleng@gvwater.vic.gov.au](mailto:alleng@gvwater.vic.gov.au)

Kevin Healy  
Agricultural Production Safety  
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry - Australia  
GPO Box 858  
Canberra ACT 2601  
02 6272 5057  
02 6272 5697  
[kevin.healy@affa.gov.au](mailto:kevin.healy@affa.gov.au)

Dr. Sunietha Katupitiya  
Senior Project Officer (Technical)  
Residuals Management  
Sydney Water  
(02) 9795 4526  
(02) 9795 4545  
[sunietha.katupitiya@sydneywater.com.au](mailto:sunietha.katupitiya@sydneywater.com.au)

Garry Kuhn  
Technical Services Manager  
Incitec Fertilizers  
P.O. Box 140, Qld. 4170  
Australia  
07 3867 9429  
07 3867 9433  
04 1225 8510  
[garry.kuhn@incitec.com.au](mailto:garry.kuhn@incitec.com.au)

Cliff Liston  
SA Water  
East Terrace  
Thebarton  
South Australia 5031  
8207 1441  
0417 859997  
[Cliff.Liston@sawater.sa.gov.au](mailto:Cliff.Liston@sawater.sa.gov.au)

Dr Jay Maheswaran  
Section Leader - Applied Science  
Department of Natural Resources and Environment  
621 Sneydes Road  
Werribee Victoria 3030  
Australia  
(03) 9742 8726  
(03) 9742 8700  
0412 103 247  
[jay.maheswaran@nre.vic.gov.au](mailto:jay.maheswaran@nre.vic.gov.au)

Dr M.J.McLaughlin  
National Cadmium Coordinator  
CSIRO Land and Water  
PMB 2  
Glen Osmond  
SA 5064  
+ 61 (0)8 8303 8433  
+61 (0)8 8303 8565  
0409 693 906  
[Mike.McLaughlin@csiro.au](mailto:Mike.McLaughlin@csiro.au)

Gary O'Connor  
Manager Waste & Technical Services  
Environmental Operations  
Queensland Government Environmental Protection Agency  
160 Ann Street Brisbane  
P.O. Box 155 Brisbane Albert Street Queensland 4002 Australia  
07 3225 1455  
07 3225 1316  
0412 134 875  
[gary.oconnor@env.qld.gov.au](mailto:gary.oconnor@env.qld.gov.au)

Nancy Penney  
Projects Officer-Biosolids Management  
Technical Services Section  
Wastewater Treatment and Industrial Waste  
Water Corporation  
629 Newcastle Street  
Leederville  
Western Australia 6007  
(08) 9420 2447  
(08) 9420 3178  
0409 881 769  
[nancy.penney@watercorporation.com.au](mailto:nancy.penney@watercorporation.com.au)

George E. Rayment  
Principal Scientist  
Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines  
Natural Sciences Precinct, Block B, 80 Meiers Road, Indooroopilly, Qld 4068  
07 3896 9487  
07 3896 9623  
0419 027 630  
[George.Rayment@nrm.qld.gov.au](mailto:George.Rayment@nrm.qld.gov.au)

Hamish Reid  
Project Manager, Operations Directorate  
Victorian Environment Protection Authority  
GPO Box 4395QQ  
Melbourne  
Vic 3001  
03 9695 2530  
03 9695 2691  
[hamish.reid@epa.vic.gov.au](mailto:hamish.reid@epa.vic.gov.au)

Bruce Shelley  
Unit Leader, Inorganic Chemistry  
State Chemistry Laboratory  
Dept. Natural Resources and Environment  
Cnr Sneydes and South Roads  
Werribee  
Vic 3030  
03 9742 8716  
03 9742 8700  
0419 103 433  
[Bruce.Shelley@nre.voc.gov.au](mailto:Bruce.Shelley@nre.voc.gov.au)

Katy Scott  
Environment Protection Officer  
EPA Victoria  
40 City Road Southbank Vic 3006 GPO Box 4395QQ Melbourne Vic 3001  
03 9695 2513  
03 9695 2578  
[katy.scott@epa.vic.gov.au](mailto:katy.scott@epa.vic.gov.au)

Leigh Sparrow  
Program Manager HAL  
P.O. Box 46  
Kings Meadow TAS 7249 Australia  
61 3 6336 5379  
61 3 6336 5395  
[leigh.sparrow@dpiwe.tas.gov.au](mailto:leigh.sparrow@dpiwe.tas.gov.au)

Mark Whatmuff  
Chemist (Soils)  
Organic Waste Recycling Unit  
NSW Agriculture  
Bldg M30  
Uni. West Sydney (Hawkesbury), Bourke St  
Locked Bag 4, Richmond NSW 2753  
(02) 4588 2134  
(02) 4578 2528  
[mark.whatmuff@agric.nsw.gov.au](mailto:mark.whatmuff@agric.nsw.gov.au)