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SCAP ALERT

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TO: SCAP Member Agencies
FROM: Raymond C. Miller, Executive Director
DATE: January 26, 2005

Diane Gilbert, Chair of the SCAP Biosolids Committee, has provided the following article.

Board knee-deep in sludge again

With pressure from Florez, supervisors revisit imported waste

By GRETCHEN WENNER, Californian staff writer e-mail: gwenner@bakersfield.com

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Kern's sludge grudge carries on.

Even after six years of rule-making, negotiations and lawsuits, Southern California sewage continues to be a messy political slushball in Kern County. It rose again Tuesday at the county meeting.

This, despite the fact that supervisors have always had the legal muscle to simply ban sludge imports, county attorney James Thebeau said last week.

The sudden resurgence of biosolids concerns, following several years of quiet, is owed to a more aggressive stance in the past year by a powerful local water agency, according to one lawmaker.

The latest jabs went this way.

At Tuesday morning's weekly meeting, Supervisors Don Maben and Ray Watson each shot back at state Sen. Dean Florez, the Shafter Democrat, and his former aide, now-Supervisor Michael Rubio.

The Florez-Rubio camps announced last Friday they would ban Southland sludge from Kern one way or another.

"I am pleased to see the Senator has taken an interest in local water quality," Maben read tersely from a letter he asked to file with the board. "But I find it ironic he is focusing on the county with the most stringent biosolids ordinance in the state."

Maben later wondered if Florez was simply harboring a "vendetta" against Kern County.

Immediately after Maben spoke, Watson requested from county staffers a comprehensive report on biosolids for the Feb. 15 meeting.

Watson, referring to the Florez-Rubio press conference, said he wanted to make sure the public and supervisors were fully informed.

The report will cover the history of biosolids management here, Kern's rules compared to other counties', potential risks and benefits of a sludge ban and the status of legal appeals to Kern's existing rules.

Rubio sat quietly, shifting occasionally, as the presentations were made. He asked a few simple questions before voting. Each request was unanimously approved.

Tuesday afternoon, Florez hammered out a written response to Maben's letter and appearance on television's KGET-Channel 17.

When asked in a phone interview why sludge is again center stage, Florez said: "We now have the Kern County Water Agency in a more proactive mode than they were a year or two ago."

Some sludge critics fear the waste might eventually contaminate Kern's valuable groundwater basin, a natural underground storage area for billions of gallons of water.

About 380,000 wet tons of biosolids, or treated human and industrial sewage, are trucked here from Los Angeles, Orange and Oxnard counties every year, according to officials from the Kern County Water Agency.

By contrast, Kern County produces about 20,000 or so tons each year of such sludge, agency officials say.

Currently, the water agency is reviewing proposals from sludge applicators to spread waste over land farther away from the water bank.