

Cheap fertiliser threatens exports - Experts wary of importing manure

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Prime Minister Bruce Golding operates a forklift to unload a batch of fertiliser at Port Bustamante, Kingston Wharves, in October last year. The fertiliser was imported by the Government to provide it at a cheaper cost for farmers. - FILE

Any widespread use by Jamaican farmers of fertiliser manufactured from human waste could undermine a growing initiative to access Europe's lucrative market for organic products that carry the Fair Trade certification, farm-sector campaigners and researchers here say.

"Human waste may have disease-causing micro-organisms and is quite often mixed with municipal chemical waste," said Dr Joseph Lindsay, a soil scientist at the Mona campus of the regional University of the [West Indies](#) (UWI). "Plus, one is uncertain what additives there might be. For [vegetables](#), the use of human-waste fertiliser should not be allowed at all."

This, experts say, is bad [news](#) for anyone who is into organic farming.

The warning from Lindsay, and others, comes in the wake of a raging controversy, ignited by the Opposition People's National Party (PNP), over the importation by the Government of fertiliser from the United States, produced from the sludge left-over from sewerage plants after the treatment of waste.

The Government started sourcing the cheaper product via a Miami-based firm as part of an effort to provide a cushion to Jamaican farmers who had been hit by high prices for domestically produced synthetic fertiliser and other imported products.

But, faced with questions over the safety of the product, agriculture minister Dr Christopher Tufton accused the PNP of scaremongering, insisting that the imported product met the standards of the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

no sewage-plant sludge

The product that was processed into a fertiliser could not be properly called human waste or excreta, Tufton and the experts he called in to help plead the case have said.

But Raymond Martin, who heads the biological [science](#) division at the UWI's Mona campus and is chairman of the Jamaica Organic Agriculture Movement, is insistent that, Tufton's assertion notwithstanding, for organic farming, fertiliser from sewage-plant sludge should not be used.

"The sewage system takes in all manner of pollutants," Martin told Sunday Business. "[Due diligence](#) would indicate that you avoid usage. In organic farming, once there is a risk, we avoid it."

Organic foods, advancing at up to 15 per cent a year, is among the fast-growing segments of Europe's agriculture market and one that Jamaica is keen to break into. Health and environmentally conscious consumers are willing to pay premium price for 'green' products.

fair trade conditions

Similarly, Jamaica, having gained a toe-hold, wants to expand its role in the Fair Trade movement, where products, certified as grown in environmentally sound conditions and with fair conditions for workers, get better prices.

Although still a tiny fraction of world agricultural trade, the Fair Trade market, at US\$3.62 billion worldwide last year, represented a 47 per cent increase over 2006.

Jamaica's participation in the Fair Trade movement is primarily via bananas, which Banana Exporting Company sought to exploit in an effort to compete in the European market against fruit cheaply grown on Latin American farms that do not meet the requisite labour and environmental standards. Indeed, the European Union funded a project to help Jamaican banana farmers, hurt by World Trade Organisation rulings diminishing their EU preferences, meet Fair Trade standards.

Marjorie Stair, a Jamaican specialist who works on the EU project in helping to get Jamaican farmers Fair Trade-ready, is one of the few experts in this area who is unconvinced that fertiliser made from the sludge from sewage treatment could be inimical to the island's Fair Trade aspirations.

"Human waste (as fertiliser) has been practised in agriculture from as long as agriculture has been practised," Stair said. "Lots of local coffee farmers and others have used it. In Asia, it's common. Human waste is an organic-type fertiliser. This would be one."

nutrients are added

Among her colleagues who disagree is Nkrumah Green, the technical adviser on an EU banana-rehabilitation project run by the Women's Resource and Outreach Centre in St Thomas, eastern Jamaica.

Green argues that a fertiliser that has its origin in human waste could not properly be described as organic, given that synthetic nutrients are added. The sludge is merely used as a filler.

The UWI's Martin has a more fundamental concern: the underlying safety of the product.

"Although it does go through a process to kill pathogens, it does not remove all," he explains. "And under the right conditions, they may again increase in numbers and contaminate food, or run off into waterways."

Additionally, Martin argues, pathogens in human waste-based fertilisers may also move into dust and spread to wider areas beyond farming zones.

applying with their hands

"Another issue: Our farmers are applying the fertiliser with their hands and that is also a problem," he said.

Martin is concerned, too, that heavy metals which may have been left over in the product, even after the processing of the sewage and the sludge, can be absorbed by plants and become a part of the food chain.

Lindsay, the UWI soil scientist, warns that if such fertiliser is used, its application should be selective.

"People throw anything down the toilet and the sink," he said. "For fresh vegetables, one would not recommend it. For tree crops there is not as much concern."

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