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Organic soil amendments and Mad Cow Disease – what you need to know

Below is an article prepared by Byron Stein from NSW Department of Primary Industries about poultry litter, pig manure and compost containing these manures. These products are regarded as Restricted Animal Materials (RAM) and therefore have particular requirements when used as organic soil amendments on pastures grazed by ruminant animals. Please read the article if you are involved in the use of these products on pasture.

Regards,

Jeff Kraak
Program Manager

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Author: Byron Stein | Development Officer, Poultry Meat, Dairy and Intensive Livestock Industries Unit, NSW
Department of Primary Industries
Government Offices | 159 Auburn Street | PO Box 389 | Goulburn NSW 2580
T: 02 48243734 | F: 02 48223261 | M: 0428259628
E: byron.stein@dpi.nsw.gov.au

If you supply or use spent poultry litter, pig manure, compost or any other organic soil fertiliser or ameliorant you need to know about RAM. RAM stands for Restricted Animal Material and it's against the law to feed RAM to ruminant animals. This includes cattle, sheep, goats, alpacas, deer and other ruminants. This restriction is also referred to as the Ruminant Feed Ban.

Not only is it illegal to feed ruminants with material containing RAM, it is also an offence for ruminants to have access to RAM. For example, if ruminants can get access to a stockpile of material containing RAM this would constitute a serious offence, irrespective of whether they have eaten any or not. This restriction extends to situations where organic fertilisers containing RAM have been spread on paddocks....

.....but this DOESN'T mean you can't use it if you have ruminant livestock...read on to find out more.

So, what exactly is RAM?

Restricted Animal Material (RAM) is any material that that consists of, or contains, matter from an animal, including fish and birds. RAM does not include gelatine, milk or milk products.

Examples of RAM include:

- poultry and pig feed as they usually contain meatmeal or fishmeal
- poultry litter/manure and pig manure as:
 - they usually contain spilt poultry and pig feed
 - poultry manure may also contain feathers and dead birds
 - composted poultry and pig manure is still considered restricted animal material
- blood and bone fertiliser and similar products made from animal blood, meat waste and bone
- mushroom compost and similar products that are made from poultry litter
- food scraps or waste that may contain animal matter
- compost made from poultry litter, pig bedding or food scraps containing meat or compost made with blood and bone.

Why is RAM a problem?

The danger comes from a serious livestock disease known as Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE). In cattle, this is known as Mad Cow Disease (the proper name being Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or BSE). In sheep, it is commonly known as Scrapie.

Mad Cow Disease in particular is a very serious emergency animal disease. Outbreaks overseas have caused massive disruption to the cattle industry. That has resulted in not only mass slaughter of cattle but also huge job losses and business failures in the cattle and related industries.

Further, Mad Cow Disease can cause a human disease known as variant Creutzfeldt Jakobs Disease (vCJD), which is both incurable and fatal. Almost 200 people have died of vCJD in the UK, since the outbreak of Mad Cow Disease over there, and a small number of others have died in other countries.

Australia is internationally recognised as having the lowest possible risk status for BSE that can be assigned to a country (negligible BSE risk status). Without an effective ruminant feed ban, Australia could not achieve this favourable status. The negligible risk status helps Australia's livestock industries to access overseas markets for Australian livestock and livestock products.

What has this got to do with my plant based compost?

Composts made entirely from plant material are not designated as RAM. However any compost that contains animal tissue or material processed from animal tissue would be classified as RAM. For example, some compost may contain kitchen scraps containing meat, bone or other animal materials. Even if the quantities added to green waste or compost is small, it would nevertheless constitute RAM.

Some manufacturers or suppliers may add blood and bone meal, poultry or pig manure or spoiled pig and poultry feed to compost to increase plant nutrient values and thereby the fertiliser value of the compost. If this is the case the compost will be classed as RAM and ruminants must not be fed or permitted access to it.

Does this mean I can no longer use poultry litter or compost that may contain RAM on my pastures or crops?

You CAN still use poultry litter or compost containing RAM as long as you follow some simple guidelines;

1. Isolate any manure or compost stockpiles or storage areas from ruminants. This may involve temporary fencing or dedicated storage areas that prevent ruminant access (see Figure 1).
2. Prior to spreading, remove all ruminant livestock from the paddock and ensure fences are adequate to keep them out. Following a minimum 21 day withholding period the ruminant livestock may be returned to the paddock. However, it is important to inspect the paddock

first. If plant growth is slow or if large application rates were used there may still be easily material that animals can consume. If this is the case extend the withholding period until you are satisfied that no residue remains for animals to eat.



Figure 1. This stockpile of spent poultry litter has been fenced off to prevent access by ruminants.

What does this mean for suppliers of poultry litter or compost that may contain RAM?

Any person or business that sells, or even gives away, material that is or contains RAM must notify the end user that the material is subject to the Ruminant Feed Ban, and therefore has restrictions on its use. It is highly advisable that written advice accompany every consignment, identifying the material as RAM and providing information on acceptable storage and use.

Where can I get more information?

If you need more information about RAM and compost go to www.animalhealthaustralia.com.au or contact your state agriculture or primary industries agency.