

Poultry Litter: Is it Fertilizer or Pollution?

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PRE-READING: Consider the following vocabulary before you read:

ARSENIC: a poisonous chemical that occurs naturally and is used in fertilizers and industry

BROILER: a chicken being raised for its meat

CARCINOGEN: something that causes cancer

LITTER: trash or waste

METRIC TON: equals 2,205 pounds or 1,000 kg

You Can Smell it from Miles Away

I grew up in the country. A lot of people in my community had chicken houses and everyone spread their litter on their fields. Also they gave it

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to their neighbors to put on their crops or gardens. My dad has used chicken litter for as long as I can remember on our garden. We never gave it a thought as to whether or not it was good for us. Around the first of spring, when everyone was about to put in a garden, you could smell the chicken litter from miles away. I always hated that time of year, but you get used to it after you've lived there most of your life. The environmentalists tell us that chicken litter is polluting our streams and rivers. I have never thought of chicken litter as a pollutant, so I thought I would do some investigating. This is what I came up with.



Arsenic in Our Chicken?

In Arkansas, broiler houses produce 1.3 million metric tons of litter annually. This litter is used mostly for fertilizing pastures. However, research shows that excessive use of litter causes pollution. It gets washed into waterways and pollutes our rivers and streams. Chicken litter contains arsenic, which is a carcinogen and may also lead to heart disease, diabetes, and a decline in mental functioning. Arsenic is added to the chicken feed to make the chickens fatter. In 2004/2005, studies confirmed that arsenic has been found in chicken sold at supermarkets and fast food restaurants.

Chicken Litter for Forests and Farms

In the Arkansas pine forest, we use poultry litter to increase timber production. Forests can absorb and retain relatively large amounts of the elements found in poultry litter without causing environmental problems. The University of Arkansas is doing studies to find the long-term effects, both good and bad on the uses of poultry litter. Their findings show that proper use of poultry litter can support farmers, pine forests, and crop growers.

Swimming in Chicken Litter

The state of Oklahoma has had a long-running suit against the state of Arkansas. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, attorneys for the Oklahoma and Arkansas poultry

industry were in court disputing whether the companies knew for decades that the over-application of poultry waste on farmland was polluting the Illinois River watershed.

To illustrate the harm caused by massive amounts of poultry litter in the river valley, the attorney held up two jars filled with dark brown waste. He claimed that in the water are phosphorus, nitrogen, arsenic, estrogen, antibiotics, and harmful pathogens. The attorneys claimed that the runoff from the fields has polluted the Illinois River with harmful bacteria and chemicals that threaten the health of the tens of thousands of people who raft and fish there each year.

He also accused the companies, such as Tyson Foods, Inc., of placing the burden of handling the waste on the farmers who raise the birds. The attorneys argued that the industry took the easy and cheap way out. They spread it directly on the fields instead of disposing of it more responsibly by burning it as energy, processing it into pellets, or composting it. This case is still in court today.

I have never thought of poultry litter as something that could be dangerous to our environment.

If the big industries would work closer with the farmers and work out some economical way of disposing of the waste from our birds, we could clean up this mess. We should find safer ways to raise our chickens. People raised chickens on their farms for years and never used chemicals, so let's sit down and figure out cheaper and safer ways to raise and process chicken. Passing the buck never did anyone any good.

I know I will think twice before I take a swim or eat the fish in the Illinois River. And writing this article didn't make me want to fry up any chicken for dinner, that's for sure.

Sources: <www.nytimes.com/2006/04/05/dining/05well.html?_r=1>; <www.naturalnews.com/029133_arsenic_meat.html>; <www.afrc.uamont.edu/liechtyh/Poultry%20Litter%20Research.htm>; <www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33010159>; <water.usgs.gov>; <www.grist.org/article/parker1/>.

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Coming Home to Roost

Arsenic is one of the harmful ingredients in chicken litter. How did it get into the chicken litter?

What pressures do poultry farmers experience? How could we persuade them to make choices that are better for the environment?

Have you or has anyone in your community used manure to fertilize a garden or plants? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using waste as fertilizer?

Want to figure out how to compost your food waste and make your own fertilizer at home? Vist <www.howtocompost.org>.