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STATE

Soil amendments could get some local monitoring under new bill in the Georgia House



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A tractor pulling a tank full of soil amendment sprays the ground at a farm in Wrens, Ga., on Jan. 26, 2023. *Katie Goodale, Augusta Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK*

Georgia state Rep. Rob Leverett, R-Elberton, on Thursday introduced new legislation to allow counties some additional ability to monitor the spread of soil amendments and to prevent illegal application.

The amendments, often wastewater from animal product processing, are marketed as a way to improve soil consistency and texture. Residents and environmental advocates say that distributors are spreading it improperly, allowing to to stink, attract pests and sometimes contaminate water.

"It's been a big problem in my district and in some other districts around me," Leverett said ahead of when the legislation was officially introduced. "I think it's an important program and I think it's a good program. I want to see the program stay and I'm just worried that some of the abuses by some bad actors will hurt the overall health of the program."

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The main goal of the legislation — [H.B. 477](#) — is two fold.

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What's in the bill?

First, it sets up an online portal through the state Department of Agriculture. Counties that opt into the portal can require distributors of soil amendment to log when they spread a soil amendment, what they are spreading and where it is being distributed at least 48 hours before they begin applying it. Violating the notice requirements can result in a \$1,500 fine. Leverett says it is similar to a Forestry Commission portal for timber harvesting. If counties do not want to use the portal, they can choose not to require it.

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The second part of the bill allows the Commissioner of Agriculture to delegate limited enforcement power to a county official. These officials could issue a cease and desist order for up to 48 hours and notify the Department of Agriculture in case of a few, egregious violations — spreading a soil amendment not registered with the state, not properly plowing the amendment, or applying the amendment in the rain.

The bill also has bipartisan support. It is cosponsored by Rep. Jesse Petrea, R-Savannah; Rep. Brian Prince, D-Augusta; and, Rep. Mack Jackson, D-Sandersville. Prince said the amendments have caused major quality of life issue in the Jefferson County portion of his district, and giving some local enforcement control will help address it.

"Right now, the city and the county, their hands are tied," Prince said.

The legislation is a first, collaborative effort to address some of these problems, he said.

"It sets the conversation on a level where the city is at the table," Prince said.

it gets the conversation going. We have the right folks at the table," Prince said.

Gaining support

Leverett said he has been gathering feedback from a number of parties before formally introducing the bill. Among the parties are local county officials in his district as well as in Jefferson and Warren counties, Savannah Riverkeepers, industry representatives such as soil amendment distributor Denali, and the Association County Commissioners of Georgia.

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"Counties in northeast Georgia have seen an increase in the disposal of industrial by-products and this has led to citizens complaining of the obnoxious odor, swarms of flies and concerns over threats to drinking water," Kathleen Bowen, associate director of governmental affairs for ACCG, noted in an email. "... Counties want to know where soil amendments are being applied in their respective counties, have the ability to inspect locations where soil amendments are being applied, and have very limited, clearly defined enforcement powers."

If the law does not pass, Bowen wrote, ACCG hopes that the Department of Agriculture will receive additional resources to enforce soil amendment laws.

Other lawmakers are interested in Leverett's bill.

State Sen. Max Burns, R-Sylvania, said he is considering but not committed to introducing legislation of his own later in the session.

"I'm working with Rep. Leverett, and I look forward to finding good solutions that protect Georgians that also allows industry to grow and expand," he said.

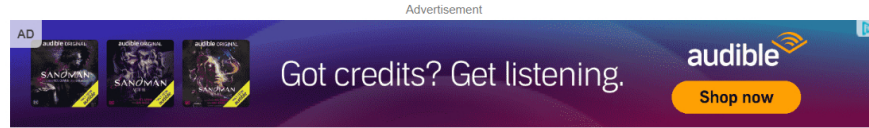


Rep. Rob Leverett Georgia General Assembly

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Sen. Lee Anderson, R-Grovetown, confirmed that he plans to work with Leverett on his bill.

"We need to get it under control," he said, and make sure "that it's put out in the correct way and we know what's in each load."



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