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Dear Mr Digger

Thank you for your letter of 27th March, also reminding me of your letter of 22<sup>nd</sup> February which included a summary of a paper by Herr *et al*.

Firstly, my apologies for not responding to earlier information you sent me regarding Iverley Park Farm Compost Site, but without being aware of the full details and context I do not consider that I am in a position to comment. However, in the correspondence of 22<sup>nd</sup> February you ask questions which I do feel I can answer.

I agree entirely with the comments from Dr Adams that position statements can and should be reviewed as new evidence becomes available. In this case it is therefore up to the Environment Agency to make that decision and my role, together with others that undertake research on behalf of various Government Departments, to provide objective information. My research team is currently undertaking study both for the Environment Agency and for Health and Safety Executive on the generation and dispersal of bioaerosols from waste composting operations, and we hope that this information will add to and complement the existing data to improve the procedures for assessing risk to the respiratory health of workers and to those affected by work activities.

You suggest that our review report (HSE Research Report 130) was based largely on work by Wheeler *et al* (2001) and Gilbert and Ward (1999). I acknowledge that we used their data, but we also extensively used data sources from published studies in mainland Europe and USA. Any review of available information may be rapidly superseded by subsequent reports and publications, so as researchers it is important that we update our awareness of recent data. From our ongoing work we are aware of publications more recent than the 2003 publication date of our review. One of these is the paper by Herr *et al*, to which you have kindly brought our attention.

By coincidence, I had the opportunity to hear Dr Herr present her data recently at a workshop the Environment Agency had organised to bring together

researchers, Agency staff and commercial compost site operators to examine current data on bioaerosols and the need for assessing and controlling risk.

I mention this because it is important in placing her work into context, which she did during her talk. Evidence existing from the data she presented (and on which she based her paper in *Occup. Env. Med.*) correlating respiratory symptoms of residents in the vicinity with exposure to bioaerosols. Because of rules in Germany which specified that waste had to be handled close to the source of generation, the location of this compost site was a compromise; some residents as you are aware were within 150m but what is also important is that the site was on ground raised above the level of the local houses. Therefore this limited the ability to restrict the spread of bioaerosols from the site to the surroundings. I understand that in recognition of these particular difficulties and the residents' health problems the site was closed.

I think this highlights a number of important points. Previous data has shown the potential for workers exposed to large concentrations of bioaerosols during waste handling to suffer allergic respiratory ill health, which is why my team and others are continuing research into assessing and controlling their exposure. There has been only limited data on the potential for waste compost bioaerosols to cause adverse health effects in residents in the vicinity of compost sites. Dr Herr's work adds to the data and provides evidence of the potential for ill health if significant exposure cannot be controlled. However, with any individual case studies it is important to place the results in context. I cannot speak for the Environment Agency, but in my opinion these data strengthen their position that requires compost site operators to assess risk to sensitive receptors within 250m of site operations and also calls upon them to control the spread of bioaerosols using for example physical barriers and operational procedures. The findings from the site which Herr and her co-workers researched shows the importance of site location to enable appropriate and proportionate controls to be implemented.

Once again, thank you for providing information. I cannot comment on your specific circumstances, but I can assure you as an objective scientific researcher that we are gathering and assessing data on a range of workplace activities that may expose workers or the public to biological hazards. We remain open minded to any information that may change currently held views and it is our task also to bring that information to the attention of others for whom we work and whose job it is to develop guidance and policy.

Yours sincerely



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