

**Ned Beecher Talk**  
**New England Organics EMS Certification Celebration**  
**Hawk Ridge Composting Facility**  
**Unity, Maine**  
**September 23, 2009**

At the same time that the “New England” (now “North East”) Biosolids and Residuals Association (NEBRA) was forming in the fall of 2007, another good idea was taking shape around the country. My notes from 1998 mention the first National Biosolids Partnership Steering Committee meeting on May 20, 1998 in Washington, during an AMSA (now National Association of Clean Water Agencies) conference. Many of the most prominent leaders in the field of biosolids management were engaged in getting the NBP going, and the news came in June that \$1 million of start-up funding had been included in the House of Representatives budget.

Perhaps because these two organizations started at about the same time, we at NEBRA have always had a particular interest in the success of the NBP. Correspondence from NEBRA to the NBP in April 1999 indicates that we were closely involved in spurring the development of the NBP’s communications functions. Cooperatively with other regional organizations, we helped NBP bring together key stakeholders at the August 1999 “Re-Investing in Success” workshop in Charlotte, NC, where it was decided that the NBP would create “a way cool ‘Wow!’ web site” that includes an on-line library and a national hub for communications on biosolids issues.

In the April 1999 communications, NEBRA also stated our interest in the EMS program: “As the environmental management system for biosolids is developed, we believe there will be a need for organizations like NEBRA to help in developing implementation strategies that meet the needs of the local and regional biosolids stakeholders, especially the smaller treatment facilities.... NEBRA expects to be involved in training and development of such services once the environmental management system is set up.” In September of that year, NEBRA forwarded news to its members noting that there were six public wastewater treatment facilities in New England that had signed on to the nascent EMS program.

Fast forward exactly ten years.

None of those six New England agencies completed their EMSes and became certified, although Merrimack, NH was close. It proved hard, perhaps especially here in New England, to convince facilities to take on the added effort to build an EMS program in addition to everything else they were doing. Back then, the NBP EMS program was more cumbersome and worked better for large agencies. But the concept was a good one, and the need for EMS has not faded.

So, in the fall of 2006, NEBRA worked with the NEWEA Residuals Committee, Pete Machno, and Lori Stone, to create a new group of New England EMS participants. Six different organizations signed up, attended workshops in Tennessee, and built their EMSes. The differences this time around were that NBP had continued to experiment and innovate, based on feedback and learning from the early years of its program. The template documents were more refined, and the process was streamlined. And, for the first time, three of the participating organizations were private companies.

I was fortunate enough to be involved in formally coaching two of the public agencies under the

auspices of the NBP. Because of NEBRA's long commitment to the EMS program, I also offered support to the other organizations – including New England Organics (NEO).

From the start, I felt that Mary Waring and Ann Thayer, who led the NEO EMS effort for this compost facility, got it. They understood the concept of continual improvement and how important it is to “avoid dumb mistakes,” as Pete Machno likes to say. I was impressed by the commitment of top management, from the beginning and all the way through to today. These people not only dotted the I's and crossed the T's in their EMS documents, they also were integrating it into their operations, making it their own. Much of what ended up in their EMS program already existed: standard operating procedures, emergency and spill plans. But they willingly re-prioritized and re-wrote and improved, using NBP EMS recommendations.

In July, 2008, Mary and Ann asked me to join Jamie Ecker, comptroller Tom Pitts, and Peter Cooke of Maine DEP to conduct this facility's first internal audit. It was a great experience, from which I learned a lot. It was also an opportunity to push a bit, be the outsider asking tough questions. From my work at NEBRA, I was especially concerned about the robustness of their communications and outreach program – Elements 6 & 9. Most in the biosolids profession prefer not to engage with the public. In this case, I was pleased to find a long list of activities that NEO has done for many years, involving neighbors to this facility, obtaining input from customers, and giving regular tours.

But my question was, what do the neighbors think? Biosolids can stink, and are the neighbors fed up? I'll never forget going to Ed and Elena Picard's house, down the road and, more importantly, downwind from here, to learn what they really think. They had some complaints: some NEO trucks were not stopping properly at stop signs. There have been odor problems, more in the past than recently. But, overall, they consider NEO a good neighbor – they help each other out.

So what is the purpose of an EMS, why does it matter?

It matters because it led to my being in the Picard's house asking their opinion, with NEO staff sitting there, humbly listening.

In 1999, one early adopter of the NBP's program said this about EMS: "What the EMS will provide is a reminder to me of what I need to pay attention to."

In a memo from the Charlotte, NC meeting 10 years ago, we stated: “We agree that the most important incentive that facilities and organizations have with regards to adopting an EMS is the value the system adds to their operations. People will want an EMS if they see that it will make plants run better, be more efficient, make the operator's life better, help the operation be more competitive.”

I can't say whether facility manager George Belmont and the operators here at Hawk Ridge Compost Facility believe EMS has made their lives better – you'll have to ask them – and it may still be too early to say. So far they have done a heck of a lot of work, and the rewards only come with time. And how do you even appreciate a “dumb mistake” avoided? But I'd say the other promised deliverables are coming in: the operation is running better and more efficiently (consider the energy efficiency improvements) and NEO is more competitive than ever.

Here and at other facilities around New England, the NBP EMS program is delivering value. One other organization has entered the third-party-audit stage. Another is close. I'm hoping to see them all

certified in the next year. Having worked with the people in these organizations, I want to see them honored, as we are honoring NEO staff today, for the good work they do. These are environmental champions who are too often overlooked. The NBP EMS program, while asking them to meet even higher standards, also provides this kind of opportunity to recognize all that they contribute to public health and the environment. Maine, and New England, would be in far worse shape if this composting facility were not functioning – and functioning very well.

Not long ago, I helped NEO with its second annual internal audit of this facility's operations. I marveled at the improvements that they have made over the past year, acting on the priorities that our internal audit team and the external auditor had suggested. This time around, I led a probe into how NEO gets feedback from its customers and how that feedback is acted upon. We found issues – minor non-conformances - such as uncertainty as to whether or not feedback from the public or customers is adequately documented and acted upon - something the EMS document they wrote says they will do. “Do those people who submit comments ever hear back from you?” we asked. Mary listened, quickly understood the concerns, and is integrating our feedback into their updated goals and objectives for the coming year. This is EMS in action: an openness to receiving criticism, looking at things from different perspectives, and taking actions to improve. I look forward to year after year of this cycle: critique, listening, taking corrective actions.

What's happened here at Hawk Ridge and within management at NEO has had impacts throughout the company. The culture here is one of professionalism and quality work. EMS is about creating such a culture. Speaking last week with another NEO employee, who works on land application programs that are unrelated to this Hawk Ridge Compost Facility, I was struck by his attention to quality. He had gone out of his way to ensure that farmers with whom he was working understood the importance of not only complying with regulations, but of being a good neighbor. “They were thinking of applying hen manure – which would have been far smellier than biosolids – in order to prove a point to the neighbors that biosolids are not as bad as it can be. I convinced them that, although that tit-for-tat might have felt good in the short term, it would not be neighborly.” That was self-policing, making sure to avoid what could have been a stupid mistake, being a good neighbor. Recycling biosolids to soils requires more than mere compliance. That's another aspect of EMS – going above and beyond.

I'm honored to be a part of this celebration. I'm please to recognize that New England Organics' Hawk Ridge Composting Facility goes above and beyond and is committed to continual improvement. I'm thrilled to be seeing EMS seeping into the company's pores.

Keep it going! And thanks for leading the way here in New England.