

John Hulsey says LHR Farms provides 'vital service' to White County community

To the Editor:

There has been much interest and discussion of my business, LHR Farms, over the past few weeks. I would like to clarify rumors and misconceptions about the farm, and to reaffirm my commitment to doing what is right. Here are the facts:

Fact: I started LHR Farms, Inc. in White County in 1996. The farm processes septic tank pump out waste and other biodegradable organic waste for use as fertilizer on restricted areas of the farm. Materials not suitable for fertilizer are sent to local landfills, licensed wastewater treatment plants, or other similar facilities. Our customers include restaurants, homeowners and industrial facilities across Northeast Georgia.

Fact: The farm has never been warned or advised by state or local health department officials that its operations pose a danger to human health or the environment.

Fact: Due to the fact that we operate on the leading edge of a critical, changing industry, we are governed by a variety of permits and consent orders that remain in place until permitting regulations are established to govern our operation. We operate totally legally and welcome scrutiny from educated health officials and representatives of the Environmental Protection Division and the local health department.

Fact: The proper management and disposal of septic tank waste and commercial waste – which includes grease trap waste – is vital to the health of our communities. This waste has to go somewhere, and most local sewer systems cannot handle it. LHR Farms and other similar operations around the state arose to meet this growing demand and to provide a safe alternative to the practice of "midnight dumping," which can cause irreparable harm to watersheds and well contamination, and to remove restaurant grease from sewers, which can cause millions of dollars of damaging back-ups, sewer line clogs and spills from clogged lift stations. This is especially relevant in a time of drought.

Fact: There are literally thousands of acres in Georgia that use treated wastewater like ours to grow crops. This waste recycling is called land application and has recognized benefits for Georgia as articulated in the draft State Water Management plan. Land application allows trees and soils to form a "living filter" that purifies the wastewater before it passes naturally into the water supply and is a common and accepted method of wastewater treatment around the United States. In fact, the federal government encourages land application as a method of organic waste disposal in its own environmental regula-

tions.

Fact: LHR Farms is committed to having a safe, clean operation and continually tests its crops and water. Sentinel wells are used to assure that pollutants do not leave the property or its buffers in groundwater. We also provide results of our monthly tests to the EPD. The farm tests water before it is land applied for final treatment. It tests for the presence of fecal coliform bacteria and nutrients to be sure that they are applied at safe and correct agronomic rates. The fact is: the soil and water around our farm now tests cleaner than it did when it was operated solely as a poultry operation.

Fact: We are not perfect. The interest in our work lately has brought some important things to our attention that we are working quickly to address. But I have been and will continue to operate the farm in full compliance with the law.

There are several things that have been pointed out in this newspaper that I feel the need to clarify.

The odors described have been vastly exaggerated. We host community events on our property, and I can assure you that a pervading odor would be noticed. There are localized odors from our agricultural activities and those on other nearby farms, but there are also strong odors and bird attraction as the result of a nearby solid waste transfer station adjoining our farm that

is owned and operated by the county. That smell is noticeable from the road and is often attributed to our farm.

We have had ongoing dealings with a neighbor who has had unfortunate health problems. She alleges that online research led her to believe that sludge could have affected her health. Septic tank waste and commercial waste are not the same as concentrated sewage sludge from large public treatment works. Much has been written online about this kind of waste and septage is different. We are sorry for the neighbor's health problems but do not agree with her conclusions about our business.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has approved permitting changes this month that address permitting of facilities like mine. According to Georgia EPD – which is the agency best qualified to manage these facilities – these changes are needed to help create an application and permitting process to better manage our operation, as well as others. These changes and a viable permitting process should bring greater public confidence and acceptance of this necessary industry. The EPD recognizes the vital role we can play in protecting sewer infrastructure and watersheds in North Georgia.

John Hulsey
Owner, LHR Farms
Gainesville