Custom Applicator Uses Dredge To Pump Lagoons

Custom manure applicator Eric Dresbach has a specialty that keeps him in high demand. He uses a dredge to get to the bottom of lagoons and open pits, pumping up the sludge and sand that can reduce a lagoon's volume. For Dresbach, the dredge is a moneymaker and a business-building tool.

"Dairy lagoons especially tend to lose capacity over time because the solids are so difficult to remove," says Dresbach. "The only way to do it has been to pump out the liquids and then break a wall and bring in a bulldozer or big tractor. It's a sloppy, expensive job. I can use my dredge to pump the sand and sludge into a tank or sand separator and then spread the sludge on fields."

Land application of manure and other biosolids is a good business for Dresbach, who started out hauling grain and switched to biosolids. His slogan in manure application is, "If it smells, we knife it in." He points out that manure is a resource that only has value in the ground. Odor in the air means nutrients are going to waste. That odor is also likely to bother friends and neighbors living around the farm site or spreading area. Keeping down odor satisfies customers and helps build his business.

"In the same way, when you use a pump to aerate a lagoon to get the sludge into solution for pumping, you put odor into the air," says Dresbach. "The dredge helps us conserve nutrients and protect the environment."

The pontoon boat is outfitted with a cutterhead that operates at variable speeds and a 1,000-gal. per min. pump. A gripper winch on up to 1,000 ft. of cable pulls the dredge across the lagoon as it works. Dresbach controls the speed of the winch, the depth and speed of the cutterhead and the speed of the pump mounted behind the head.

"We can operate 15 ft. below the water surface and take out a more uniform product," says Dresbach. "I put the cutter head into the sludge and can physically see the product as we are pumping it. I can dial the speed up or down to make it as thick as we want."

Dresbach says every livestock situation is different. While dairy sludge is heavy and often has a high sand content, hog manure solids are light and fluffy and easier to pump. Working with the sledge has been a learning experience and one he has had to do on his own. While similar dredges are used in industrial settings, they are rare in agriculture.

"To my knowledge, I am the only operator in Ohio using a dredge in manure lagoons," says Dresbach.

The dredge is only one of his tools. He has four JCB tractors rigged with 7,300-gal. honey wagons and 9-shank toolbar applicators for injecting manure. He uses a large tank for primary pumping. Five semi-trailers transport manure from the tank to the honey wagons in the field. He also uses three tractors for lagoon pumping and doing applications, as well as three trash pumps for pulling stored manure out from under hog barns.

"Our goal is to move at least 200,000 gal. of manure per day," says Dresbach. "We pull manure samples every hour as the manure is being loaded to let customers know exactly what nutrient levels are being spread," says Dresbach. "That lets them adjust their fertility program as needed."

In addition to his land application business, Dresbach consults with livestock producers in the design, construction, renovation and operation of manure lagoons. He also consults with new custom manure applicators on business entrepreneurship, operations and growing their

business.
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