

## Sweet solution: Wellington horse manure finds a new home



Hold the spice, just sugar has made everything nice for Wellington's horse manure disposal — a once-bigger problem in the village.

The average horse produces about 50 pounds of manure a day, multiply that by more than 12,000 horses at peak season and the village alone produces about 80,000-100,000 tons a year.

That all has to go somewhere.

Recently, U.S. Sugar Corp. in Clewiston began taking the bulk of it, but in past years, some rogue haulers undercut their competitors and offered stable owners to take it away for a lower price.

Sometimes it would end up in vacant lots in the area, causing a smelly issue for neighbors in Wellington, Loxahatchee Groves and Royal Palm Beach.

"If the hauler that you're using is illegally dumping it, it becomes a lot of people's

problems," said Mike O'Dell, Wellington's project planning director. He added that it's not just a Wellington issue, and there are a good amount of horses in the surrounding area as well.

Village officials have met with local haulers once a year for the past three years, including a sit-down last month.

In the past, problems have arisen because there was no good place to take the manure. Palm Beach County Waste Management and others charge a fee to dispose of it, which drives up the price.

Enter U.S. Sugar, who agreed to take about 80 percent of Wellington's horse manure beginning in 2013 to fertilize some of the land where cane crops are planted.

For the past two years, the manure application to soil has been in a pilot program stage, spokeswoman Judy Sanchez said. They weren't sure if it was helping.

But in Year 3, Sanchez said the manure has started lowering the need to add additional nutrients to the soil. The company looks at the agreement as a way to help the community and the crops.

"We believe this is an example of a win-win situation and an effective, sustainable agriculture practice — both for the equestrian community in Wellington and for the areas that we are applying the soil amendment," she wrote in an email.

The company has been applying it to about 250 acres, which is a tiny portion of the 200,000 acres it farms. The manure composts for 3-12 months before the fields are replanted.

Without U.S. Sugar, O'Dell worried that the illegal dumping problem could have gotten worse.

"If we didn't have them, we'd probably be at each other's throats right now," he said, adding that he's happy with the work that the haulers are doing.

And the haulers haven't brought forward too many complaints.

Enrique Dragon, of Palmetto Mills, said they're happy to take the waste to the fields where they can get rid of it for free.

The life of a hauler can be hard.

Dragon said they work more than 16-hour days during the season, starting about 4:30 a.m. and sometimes not getting home until 7 p.m.

"We work like 24/7," he said. "We don't stop."

There's no indication that U.S. Sugar will stop taking the manure, but O'Dell said they have to plan for the future. He would first look to the private sector to see if it could be reused or recycled.

He won't rule out the possibility that Wellington would build its own waste collection facility, but there are no immediate plans.