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Bill would delay ban on land spreading of septic tanks waste by two years

By Bruce Ritchie

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A House committee approved a bill on Tuesday that delays a prohibition on the land spreading of septic tank waste, which was required in 2010 springs legislation.

About 100,000 septic tanks are pumped out each year resulting in 100 million gallons of septic tank waste, called septage. There are 92 regulated sites which receive the waste including farms that use it as fertilizer, according to the Florida Department of Health.

SB 550 in 2010 banned the land application effective beginning on Jan. 1, 2016. This year, HB 1113 by Rep. Katie Edwards, D-Sunrise, as filed would have pushed back the ban by four years.

Her late-filed strike-all amendment on Tuesday would reduce the delay to two years and provide for a study of the options for waste disposal by March 1, 2015.

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The study will identify "the most cost-effective and environmentally-friendly ways to move forward as we both protect our environment and make sure homeowners have a cost-effective and environmentally-friendly means to dispose of septage from their septic tanks," Edwards said.

SB 550 in 2010 was bill touted as a springs protection measure by supporters. It included a statewide inspection requirement for septic tanks and the land application ban beginning in 2016.

The inspection requirement was repealed in 2012 following a backlash by legislators in North Florida and rural homeowners. But the ban on land application of septage remained.

Some owners of businesses that maintain septic tanks said Tuesday that the ban would force them to take the waste to landfills or wastewater treatment plants if the practice is banned. They said the longer travel would raise costs for homeowners who may choose not to maintain their septic tanks.

"We certainly we believe in looking at all the options," said Roxanne Groover, executive director of the Florida Onsite Wastewater Association. "We just don't want this one option taken off the table."

Environmental group representatives said they support the study but they do not support delaying the ban.

Rep. Clovis Watson, D-Gainesville, said he opposed the extension. "I would be more amenable to us looking at a report in 2016 and making a decision as to an extension," he said.

Rep. Elizabeth Porter, R-Lake City, said no one can accuse her of not being a protector of springs but she said there was no scientific evidence that the waste is causing pollution in waterways.

"I can't vote against this amendment until someone shows me there is a danger in postponing it," she said.

HB 1113 has two more committee stops. The Senate companion, SB 1160, hasn't been heard in the first of its three committee stops.

Related Research: Sept. 19, 2011 "Land Application of Septage from Onsite Sewage Treatment and Disposal Systems," Senate Issues Brief 2012-2016

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