

Magic mix that could save fens

GREAT billowing clouds of vapour drift across the deserted, dank fenland fields, leaving behind dark steaming, stinking mounds.

As the potion bubbles away, Mr Ferdie Hensby, waves the walking stick he doesn't really need, like a magic wand.

It is a giant spell he is weaving, transforming waste products into a new material which in turn could give the fading fens that surround his depot at Woodhurst, near St Ives eternal life.

There are only two basic ingredients, and the formula is: 20 tons of straw plus 100 tons of sewage sludge equals 70 tons of rich compost.

The straw comes from the farms that surround his mushroom composting depot, the sewage is selected from local depots

Experiment

After about three weeks, in which the mixture itself is constantly mixed and turned, it produces enough heat to kill all harmful ingredients. It is ready to be spread on farmland, a nitrogen-enriched manure, free of smells.

Ferdie says it can be spread at up to five tons per acre, adding rich humus. He has experimented for four years with the system and in that time has built up a four-inch layer of rich tilth on a former sand and gravel pit at Kennett near Newmarket.

He envisages farmers near Woodhurst bringing in their straw and a month later taking delivery of the compost made from it. And, he says, it could save the fens.

"In 50 to 80 years, the peat layer on the fens will have gone, and we shall have a dustbowl" he said. "They need humus to stop them disappearing."

Ferdie left the Army in 1947 to start farming near Newmarket. He has been at Woodhurst since 1964, still farming. But has developed a major industry there as well — making compost for mushroom growing. One-fifth of all the mushrooms cultivated in England are grown on his compost.

Certainly he has the potential there for launching a new industry. Already several operations take place on the premises, using waste from processing vegetables, chicken

by Dan Jackson

manure, animal waste and even celery trimmings.

Mr Mike Shellens of Anglian Water's management services team said he had been searching for better ways to dispose of sewage waste, but all seemed expensive. He made an appointment nearly two years ago to discuss the problem with Mr Hensby and they came up with the present system.

It should be popular with farmers. It provides a practical use for straw, so they will not have to burn it off; it does not use inorganic fertilisers which the farmers are accused of draining into ditches; it enriches and replaces lost soil; it can be delivered and allowed to stand so the farmer can apply it at the best time.

If its price is competitive, Ferdie's magic muck could save the fens.



Mr Ferdie Hensby (left) and Mr Mike Shellens inspect the product.

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