An old Chinese proverb states "Man belongs to the soil, not the soil to man." For centuries, the Chinese have realized the value of returning organic waste to the land, and today >50% of the fertility required for growing their crops comes from such sources. In his book entitled Farmers of Forty Centuries, F. H. King (1911), studied the land use of organic waste in the Far East early in the 20th century and emphasized the value of such material for supplying the necessary elements for plant growth.

The disposal of sewage sludge is a situation that man has been faced with for quite some time, but the problem is becoming greater as population increases and laws governing the methods of disposal become more stringent and costs increase. Energy conservation begins with recycling. Sewage sludge application to cropland is one such opportunity. The 1977 Federal Clean Water Act and its subsequent amendments insure increasing amounts of sewage sludge as treatment plants improve their methods. This sewage sludge can be: (i) buried in a landfill where it will produce methane (sewer gas) for many years and may cause an explosion such as the one that occurred in Madison, WI in October 1983; (ii) incinerated using some fuel (oil or natural gas) to destroy this valuable organic matter and nitrogen (N) while creating a potential air pollution situation (the ash must still be disposed of in a landfill site); or (iii) perhaps the best option, land application according to recommendations established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) and state governments (Peterson et al., 1982). Use of sewage sludge on land also recycles valuable plant nutrients.