

QUESTION EVERYTHING

More testing on Dillo Dirt in the future

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The City of Austin treats our sewage and combines the resulting sludge (now called biosolids) with yard trimmings to create Dillo Dirt, the compost that the city sells for use in any type of garden. Though properly treated excrement can be a beneficial fertilizer, many cities with similar sludge-recycling programs have created compost with dangerously high levels of chemicals from industrial waste that was probably illegally flushed into the public wastewater system.

The city claims Dillo Dirt is safe for use in vegetable gardens based on testing done in 2003. My question is, is that it? One test five years ago? Did the city follow up on the recommendations outlined in 2003? And a related question: What happens to the sludge not used in Dillo Dirt? - D.G.

Last September, Austin Water Utility's Center for Environmental Research announced it would be receiving a three-year, \$300,000 federal grant to study biosolids at the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant in East Austin. Partnering in the project will be the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Lab in Temple, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Environmental Contaminants Laboratory in San Marcos and the U.S. Geological Survey's National Water Quality Assessment Laboratory in Denver.

The research will follow up on the recommendations from the 2003 study in addition to other research, says Jody Slagle, biosolids reuse manager at Hornsby Bend. The original recommendations include comparing the chemical composition of products similar to Dillo Dirt as well measuring the impact of seasonal yard trimmings (leaves vs. grass clippings) on the products.

The reason there hasn't been any follow-up until now is that the Center for Environmental Research wanted partners that could offer additional expertise on the matter, Slagle says. He also added that there has been an improvement in technology during the past five years that will allow for more detailed and sensitive testing.

All biosolids at Hornsby Bend undergo a digestion process that kills most disease organisms. Biosolids not composted to create Dillo Dirt are used to fertilize an on-site farm where feed crops are grown.