

Smoke from compost fire to continue for days

Many 911 calls about compost fire

By Claudia Grisales

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A compost fire burning near the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport could continue to smolder for several more days and spread smoke to neighboring communities, an official said Wednesday.

On Tuesday night, fire officials said they were receiving numerous calls regarding smoke and smell coming from the fire, which became more noticeable to nearby residents when winds shifted. The smoke could change directions again depending on wind, an official said.

Fire officials are urging residents to not call 911 unless they see flames.

Utility officials say it could take several days to extinguish the compost pile fire at the Hornsby Bend Water Treatment Plant on FM 973 near Colorado River Bridge.

“We just need these winds to stay down and we will be in a good shape,” Austin Water spokesman Jason Hill said.

Hill reiterated Wednesday that the piles are the byproduct of the treatment plants and essentially are “natural things burning,” so the smoke is not toxic.

Austin fire crews have set up monitoring posts to continuously measure carbon monoxide and other particulates, but haven’t recorded any levels surpassing threshold concerns, Hill said.

“It’s all a matter of threshold numbers,” Hill said.

For example, monitoring crews have recorded carbon monoxide levels close to zero, Hill said. For carbon monoxide, crews would be concerned if the threshold limit reached 25 parts per million, which has not occurred, he said.

The compost pile fire started Monday after high winds ignited the piles. The fire was contained later that night, officials said.

Fire and water utility officials spent Tuesday creating a plan to extinguish the large smoldering piles, which look like burning coals, Hill said.

The fire can't be extinguished in a traditional sense with water, instead the large piles have to be separated and over time hit with water to cool them down, Hill said.

"We just want to thank everyone for their patience," Hill said.