

CONTINUING COVERAGE: Hornsby Bend compost fire

Compost fire to cost Austin at least \$2 million

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The city of Austin has spent at least \$2 million to put out a persistent fire that has charred piles of compostable material at Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant in southeast Austin since late February.

Austin officials say the fire is likely to be extinguished by Wednesday.

“There are one or two hotspots left,” said Jason Hill, a spokesman for Austin Water Utility, which oversees the site.

When all costs are calculated, the cost of putting out the fire and hauling away destroyed material could climb to the neighborhood of \$3 million, with the chief costs being manpower and machinery, Hill said.

The material, spread out over 25 acres at the plant, caught fire on Feb. 25 in a large pile of wood chips. With trapped organic material capable of gathering tremendous heat, spontaneous combustion is likely to blame, say city officials. Small blazes are not unheard of at compost sites.

Compost fires are hard to put out, because hosing down a large pile with water may intensify reactions caused by the bacteria deep inside the piles, further adding to the heat.

Hill said the city has tried to keep residents, businesses and schools in a 5-mile radius apprised of the situation.

The sewage treatment facility stretches for more than 3 miles along the Colorado River and attracts a variety of birds — and bird watchers. Some parts of the site that had been closed to the public reopened on Saturday.

Updates are posted on the utilities website, www.austintexas.gov/water.



Workers spray water on smoldering compost piles on March 5 as tractors break the piles apart to allow the water to soak farther in.



Wind carries smoke from smoldering piles toward the Austin airport and the nearby neighborhood on March 5.