

City projects compost fire to cost millions

Austin Water says the operation will run \$2M plus

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- Angie Beavin

AUSTIN (KXAN) - The city of Austin is projecting a massive compost fire from last month will cost between \$2 million to 3 million.

The fire broke out February 25 in Southeast Austin at the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Plant. Strong winds joined forces with dry air and ignited some smoldering compost. The 25-acre compost pile burned for more than a week.

Austin Water Utility oversees the site, which turns water and yard wastes into the fertilizer, also known as dillo dirt.

Now, they're adding up costs. Jason Hill with Austin Water says the exact cost isn't finalized, but they expect it to cost millions.

He said the multi-million dollar price tag is due to the great lengths taken to control the fire, including hundreds of thousands of gallons of water, contracted fire crews, and special equipment.

At the site Tuesday, crews were still checking for hot spots. Large machinery is being used to move compost piles. Hill said some of the compost could be salvaged.

"Sometimes material that has gone through a fire can be utilized, so it's going to be up to our scientists there to make a determination," Hill said.

While dillo dirt production could be in question, people who live in neighborhoods near the compost pile are breathing a sigh of relief--and fresh air.

"The smoke, it was horrible," said Alfort Lemuel, who lives in Hornsby Bend. "I'd mostly stay in the house. When you get in my car, you can smell the smoke all in the car."

Lemuel and his neighbors dealt with the smoky air and foul smell for days. They're happy to see things getting back to normal.

"We were glad when the wind shifted and it went back the other way," Lemuel said.