

HORNSBY BEND

Persistent compost fire at Hornsby Bend could last a few more weeks

By Asher Price, American-Statesman Staff

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A persistent fire smoldering amid the 25 acres of compost material at Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant in Southeast Austin likely will continue to smoke for up to three more weeks, according to a contractor at the site.

The fire, now just over a week old, has transformed the neat windrows of yard trimmings and sludge into something looking like primeval planet Earth.

A haze of smoke, whipped up by the wind, moves steadily over an ashy landscape.

With trapped organic material capable of gathering tremendous heat, spontaneous combustion is likely to blame, say officials with Austin Water Utility, which oversees the site. Small blazes are not unusual at compost sites; this one began innocently enough on Feb. 25 in a large pile of wood chips, said Jody Slagle, compost and biosolids reuse manager for the city of Austin.

“We felt we had it under control, but then then the winds picked up,” he said.

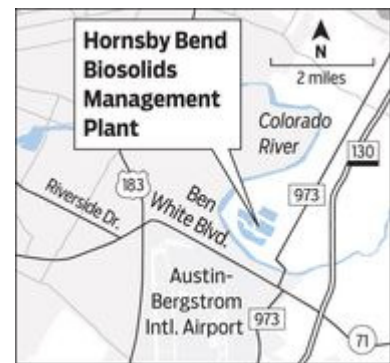
Soon enough, the composting site was aglow with fire — a volcano atop a concrete pad. A perfect soup of drought and wind is to blame for the fire’s spread and persistence, said Jason Hill, a spokesman at Austin Water Utility.

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.

In February, around the time the Hornsby fire broke out, firefighters from 10 different departments were called to help extinguish flames at a mulching facility in Fort Bend County. In the San Antonio suburb of Helotes in 2007, it took firefighters three months — at a cost of \$5.5 million — to put out a massive compost fire that reached temperatures of around 2,000 degrees.



Workers Tuesday spray water on smoldering compost piles at the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant. The piles — months worth of yard trimmings and other materials that were destined for Dillo Dirt — have been on fire for more than a week.



LINDA SCOTT / STAFF

Austin officials say the Hornsby Bend fire won't spread beyond the concrete pad.

After the Austin Fire Department deemed the Hornsby Bend blaze contained, contractors were enlisted to put it out, a painstaking process involving the dismantling of months worth of yard trimmings and other materials that were destined for Dillo Dirt.

"It's heart-breaking," said Dana White, wastewater regulatory manager at Austin Water Utility. "So much work had gone into preparing these materials."

Officials could not estimate how many tons of potential compostable material were now unusable, but to the naked eye it looked like enough material to aide gardeners in thousands of homes had been charred.

So far, authorities say the smoke hasn't reached unsafe levels. Stifling the fire enough to stop the smoke could take two to three more weeks, said Tony Stamper, Texas regional manager with OMI Environmental Solutions, one of the contractors on the job.

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 historically has attracted a variety of birds — and bird watchers. However, while crews fight the fire, Austin Water has closed the site to the public, including the Platt Lane entrance, at least through Sunday. Updates are posted on the utilities website, www.austintexas.gov/water.

At a tire shop on Texas 71, just south of the fire, smoke hung in the air. Fifty-five year-old Ivory Brannon, who does odd jobs at the shop, said the smoke was not an issue.

"I've been working outside so long this doesn't bother me," he said.