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Smoldering compost fires continue to concern neighbors

By: Jeff Stensland



More than one week after it sparked, the massive compost fire at the Hornsby Bend bio-solids plant continues to burn.

Just across the street, Sonia Barboza returns home to grab a few things for work. She says the heavy smoke forced her out last week.

"I actually drove over here from my son's house to see if the air would affect me. It affects me differently than anybody else because of my condition," Barboza said.

Barboza has been diagnosed with asthma and vocal chord dysfunction. Combined, the two can make it difficult for her to breathe even on a normal day.

"My voice starts getting scratchy, then--all of a sudden--it just goes away," Barboza said.

Professor Lea Hildebrandt Ruiz in the University of Texas' Department of Chemical Engineering says microscopic particles in the smoke are the biggest issue for people downwind.

"They are really bad for human health because they are small enough that they can get deep into the human lung, and then they get stuck there," Hildebrandt Ruiz said.

Officials with the Austin Water Utility said air quality tests have been conducted since the fire began, but no harmful compounds have been found in any dangerous levels.

The burning compost is made from treated sewage and yard waste and is marketed as Dillo Dirt.

While officials say only organic matter is burning, Hildebrandt Ruiz says the matter can break apart and form harmful compounds.

"It's very difficult to predict exactly what will be formed in combustion because it depends on the exact composition of the fuel, which in many cases is not known," she said.

Regardless, the smoke itself is still too much for Barboza. She's worried that despite the latest update, the smoke could keep her away for days.

The city has created and sold Dillo Dirt for almost 25 years, but hasn't tested for toxins in the compost since 2005.

They expect cleanup to last several more weeks.

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