

City concerned about elevated ammonia levels at sewage site

Staff, consultant to determine scope of problem at Hornsby Bend.

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Concerned about the detection of elevated levels of a fertilizer component beneath the City of Austin's Hornsby Bend sewage treatment facilities, city officials will meet today with a consultant to discuss the problem.

Elevated levels of ammonia have been found at three of 20 groundwater monitoring wells around the Hornsby Bend site since 2005, when monitoring began, according to city officials, who are trying to figure out the scope of the problem.

Because there are no drinking water standards for ammonia, however, the data were never flagged, and came to light only this year as the city prepared to overhaul sewage treatment facilities at Hornsby Bend, said Jane Burazer, assistant director of the Austin Water Utility's treatment program.

"There is no standard for this," said Raj Bhattarai, manager of the utility's environmental and regulatory services division.

An anonymous complaint to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality last week raised the possibility that the ammonia levels were linked to accommodations in sludge-water ponds for popular birding activities at the site. TCEQ spokesman Terry Clawson said an investigator has been assigned to the case.

One of the groundwater monitoring wells around the Hornsby Bend site has picked up levels of ammonia hovering around 18 parts per million in three tests since 2005.

That's "a big number," said Barbara Mahler, a hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. Ammonia can be toxic for fish and wildlife. The National Academy of Science recommends, and many European nations have adopted, a drinking water standard of 0.5 parts per million for ammonia.

But the well is a monitoring well, not a drinking well, and, cautioned Mahler, "it's not clear whether it's directly related to land use activities in that area or not."

Two other wells have picked up ammonia in the 5 to 6 parts per million range, Burazer said. The other wells have from 0.2 to 3 parts per million.

The Hornsby Bend facilities sit adjacent to the Colorado River, but elevated levels of ammonia have not been detected in the river, according to data at the Lower Colorado River Authority, which maintains its own monitors in the area.

The primary function of the 1,200-acre Hornsby Bend site is the handling of Austin's excrement. Ammonia, a compound of nitrogen and hydrogen, is found in fertilizers and urine. And when most Austin toilets flush, the contents are piped to one of the city's wastewater treatment plants, which filter out most of the water, purify it and discharge it into the Colorado River just beyond Lady Bird Lake. The remaining sludge is sent on to Hornsby Bend.

Water is squeezed out from the solids, and then impounded in several holding ponds before getting sprayed on several hundred acres of nearby fields. The ponds, a rich nutrient soup, have served as popular man-made wetlands among birds, and, in turn, birders.

Additional material from staff writer Marty Toohey.

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