

Officials vote no on moving Austin sludge to Bastrop County

11:59 a.m. Wednesday, July 13, 2016

Bastrop County commissioners passed a resolution Monday against Denali Water Solution's application to move Austin's sewage sludge to a 3,000-acre ranch in Cedar Creek.

The county's main concern against Denali's plan is the potential for harmful chemicals to leach into the groundwater and run off into surrounding creeks and wells, resulting in pollution and potentially negative health effects. The sludge pad sits atop the Hooper and Wilcox aquifers.

For years, Austin has been hauling its sludge 100 miles southeast to Eagle Lake. But with their \$4.65 million-a-year contract with Synagro ending, they've been on the hunt for a better deal.

Arkansas-based Denali Water Solutions was one of five companies to put in a bid with the city. If the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality approves Denali's permit, the company could be carrying Austin's sludge to a private ranch owned by Dalton Wallace that borders Cedar Creek, a tributary to the Colorado River.

Bastrop County's resolution doesn't have any direct bearing on the deal between the city of Austin and Denali Water Solutions. It will be sent to Austin Mayor Steve Adler and the TCEQ as a public statement.

Wallace, along with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said the sludge isn't harmful. It's similar to fertilizer and helpful with hay production and other ranching activities.

But others aren't so sure. At Monday's Commissioners Court meeting, many residents voiced their concerns.

"I truly hope that this sludge situation doesn't come to us," resident and nurse Corrine Grimes said. "I have a sinking feeling there's a lot we don't know, and the science is inexact, the science of waste disposal."

Solid waste is processed at Austin's Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant, where bacteria in anaerobic digesters kill off most of the disease organisms and shrink the volume of



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the material, pressing out all the water. The result is a solid product known as sludge, which is often hailed as prime fertilizer.

“What’s left over is not fertilizer,” said Phil Cook, who lives nearby the Wallace ranch. “It’s called fertilizer for political purposes. It’s not recycled, and it’s not free of chemicals by any means.”

According to a group of concerned residents in Bastrop County who created their own website, the sludge contains a number of harmful pathogens, synthetic chemicals, hormones and heavy metals.

Denali, however, said the TCEQ has a strict process for ensuring environmental safety.

Regardless of what the TCEQ, the state’s highest environmental authority, decides, Bastrop County commissioners have chosen to reject the potential deal.

State Sen. Kirk Watson, D-Austin, and state Rep. John Cyrier, R-Lockhart, have also sent letters to the TCEQ asking for public hearings on the application.

Additionally, the county had asked Carolyn Dill, its engineering director, to look into what impact hauling the sludge from Austin would have on Bastrop County roads.

According to Dill, the roads leading to the Wallace ranch — Shiloh, Hoffman and Earl Callahan — are all “low-volume” and are not designed to handle the heavy weight of trucks stocked with thousands of pounds of sludge.

“While these county roads are public roads and open to unrestricted traffic, they have not been engineered for these loads and the resulting damage will be an ongoing expense to the county and Precinct 3,” Dill wrote in a July 6 email to County Judge Paul Pape.

Denali Water Solutions did not immediately return calls for comment Monday. The company has said its application has met or exceeded all environmental rules.