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ENVIRONMENT

# Will \$20M plan turn more Austin sludge into compost?

Not everyone is sure contract with private firm would be desirable.

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Austin has a sludge problem.

Several years after a buildup of compost led to persistent fires, costing at least \$3 million and taking more than a month to extinguish, city officials are keen to hire a waste hauler to cut down the amount of material piling up around its Hornsby Bend facility.

They blame the buildup on a downturn in the market for Dillo Dirt, the Austin-branded compost composed of sewage sludge and yard clippings. A half-dozen years ago, the city of Austin sold 45,000 cubic yards of Dillo Dirt for nearly \$550,000 in revenue. Last year, sales were down by nearly two-thirds, city data show.

City officials say the drought was to blame, as Austinites turned away from landscaping.

The Austin City Council will consider in August a contract that will turn over much of the compost-making to an outside company. Eager to steer compostable material away from landfills, city officials say the deal will mean more compost and more sales.

But environmental activists and a powerful landfill and compost company say the deal will lead to less composting. Environmentalists say the contract is a prelude to shipping more sludge to be spread on ranchland or farmland outside Austin, known as land application.

Every day, city facilities treat about 90 million gallons of wastewater, separating about a million gallons of solids destined for the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management facility.

Eventually, the solids are broken down and disease organisms are killed by bacteria. Finally, the city is left with sludge, which it combines with branches and leaves picked up curbside to create Dillo Dirt.

"Our goal is to keep our inventory low," said Jane Burazer, assistant director for treatment at the Austin Water Utility. "We are trying to keep that lower to keep the risks and dangers down. If we could move it as Dillo Dirt, we would love to move it as Dillo Dirt, but we are not getting those sales."

Officials even went so far as to get Dillo Dirt certified through the U.S. Composting Council so that it would qualify for TxDOT projects — but to seemingly no avail.

"We don't want to stockpile too much, to keep down risk of fire," Burazer said.

The city has been disposing of sludge through Dillo Dirt and by paying Baltimore-based Synagro to haul off the rest — to Eagle Lake, about 100 miles away, to be spread on ranchland.

"Ideally, we'd like to get where every single pound of biosolids goes out through some kind of composting method — that's our goal," Austin Water Director Greg Meszaros told members of the city's Water and Wastewater Commission this month. "It's not to increase land application."

"Because land application makes the neighbors crazy," William Moriarty, chairman of the commission, said at the meeting. In recent months, communities in Bastrop County and Fayette County have opposed proposals to ship sludge there.

"Yes, it's a little less desirable," Meszaros said. "It's better than hauling to a landfill, but it's not as desirable as composting."

Dillo Dirt has run in the red in recent years: Last year, costs to produce Dillo Dirt edged over \$650,000, while revenue amounted to about \$205,000. Over the last five years, the program has typically lost between \$400,000 and \$500,000 a year, according to information provided by Austin Water.

And while Austin's composting operation has come in for national acclaim, critics have raised questions about Dillo Dirt in the past.

In 2002, John Dromgoole, owner of the Natural Gardener, decided to drop the product because of concerns that herbicides used to clear tree roots from city pipes could end up in the product.

And in 2009, after heavy rain at the Austin City Limits Music Festival in Zilker Park turned Dillo Dirt into mud, some people attributed rashes they developed to contact with the mud.

City officials said the 130-to 170-degree temperatures generated during the composting process kill pathogens. An Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department analysis found that Dillo Dirt poses no health risk even to people who accidentally ingest some.

The five-year proposed contract with Synagro, worth as much as \$20.35 million, "is good for the environment, good for the utility, and good for our ratepayers," Meszaros said.

The proposed contract isn't public record because it's part of a public bidding process, he said.

Andrew Bosinger, who does business development for Synagro, said the company's aim is to compost the material, selling it under its own compost brand, All-Gro. Bosinger called land application a "backup" option, "only at the direction of the city."

But activists with Texas Campaign for the Environment say the contract has not been properly vetted and the sludge material still could be spread on ranch-land rather than used strictly for compost.

Suggesting city officials should look more broadly at how it collects trash, trimmings and organic material — a curbside compost pilot pickup program is poised to be broadened — the group has warned council members that "hasty approval" of the contract could "threaten the continued existence of these visionary programs and foreclose other innovative approaches in the future."

Bob Gregory, who heads Texas Disposal Systems, which has landfill and other contracts with the city and does commercial composting in other parts of the state, and who has been in touch with Texas Campaign for the Environment on the issue, said he plans to meet with the City Council soon to discuss it.

"They need to pause and take time to do it right," Gregory said.

Gregory's company did not apply for the contract.

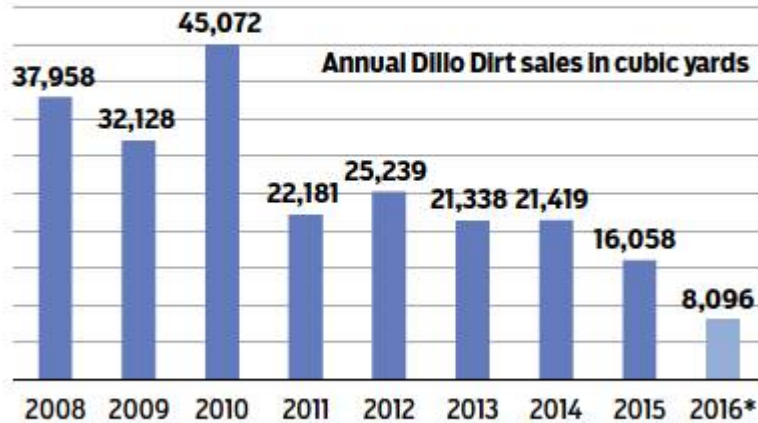
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Piles of yard trimmings are mixed with sewage solids to create Dillo Dirt at the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management facility. The city of Austin has been losing, typically, between \$400,000 and \$500,000 a year on slow sales, and officials are considering hiring a private waste hauler to reduce the pileup around the plant. AMERICAN-STATESMAN 2011

## Dillo Dirt sees decline

Sales of Austin's compost, made of a sewage byproduct and yard clippings, have slowed.



Note: 2016 figure through June

Source: Austin Water Utility

ROBERT CALZADA / STAFF