

# Austin's sewage sludge could head to Bastrop County

NEWS By **Asher Price** - American-Statesman Staff



12

## Austin sludge to Bastrop County?

Austin American-Statesman



**Dalton Wallace**  
Owner Of Bastrop County Ranch

Posted: 4:48 p.m. Monday, June 27, 2016

---

### Highlights

State and federal authorities say biosolids are an acceptable way to fertilize soils.

---

Dalton Wallace says sludge will act as fertilizer at his ranch; neighbors are divided over the prospect.

---

Some neighbors worry about groundwater pollution and truck traffic.

**CEDAR CREEK** · Twenty-five years ago, shortly after he bought his 3,000-acre ranch in western Bastrop County, Dalton Wallace was approached by a company that wanted to put a landfill on it.

The deal was a lucrative one, he says, but he turned it down.

"I didn't want to do that to my neighbors," he said.

Now his neighbors are divided on another prospect for the land: a landing pad for Austin's sewage sludge.

With its current sludge contract nearing an end, Austin has received **five bids** for a new deal, including from Arkansas-based **Denali Water Solutions**, which has asked the state for permission to spread sludge on Wallace's land.



Dalton Wallace feeds cattle at his B&W Ranch in Cedar Creek.

Much of Austin's sludge, the solid waste byproduct of the sewage treatment process, is trucked by Synagro to near the community of Eagle Lake, about 100 miles southeast of Austin. The city pays Synagro up to \$4.65 million per year, and Austin officials said they wanted to see if they could get a better deal.

### RELATED CONTENT: Sludge company withdraws Fayette permit request

**Denali Water Solutions** recently **withdrew a request** after an outcry to dump sludge in Fayette County on land fronting the Colorado River.



Sewage sludge site proposed for Bastrop County

Now some Bastrop County residents are riled up; a **website** aimed at stopping the sludge has been launched and an organizing meeting is scheduled for Tuesday night.

They worry that the sludge will seep into nearby Cedar Creek, a tributary that feeds the Colorado River.

To Wallace, who says the ingredients in the sludge are the same as the fertilizer he currently distributes on his property, the anxiety is something of a mystery.

"I understand people are upset, but I don't have a clue why," said Wallace, who has transformed the once-wooded ranchland into scenic open prairie, bounteous with grass. "It's the same stuff we're putting out every year. I figured this might do Austin a lot of good, and do the environment a lot of good and improve the soil. Right now they're shipping this stuff a hundred miles. This will save the environment a

little bit, and save wear and tear on the roads.+

He said the land has little runoff into Cypress Creek, which lies more than a mile from parts of the property; under the permit application, sludge could be spread to about 2,000 acres of his ranch.

## Moving sludge around Texas

The other companies bidding to haul and handle Austin's sewage are Forsythe Brothers Infrastructure, Texas Element, Allen Click and Synagro. The company names were obtained by the American-Statesman through a request under the Texas Public Information Act.

The city produces up to 100,000 cubic yards of processed biosolids a year. As much as a third of that is combined with yard trimmings at the Hornsby Bend Biosolids plant to produce the compost called Dillo Dirt; sludge also can be used as fertilizer for hay production and other ranching activities, and nearly all the rest is hauled away by **Synagro**.

John Forsythe of the Forsythe Brothers said his company's bid does not involve land application of the sludge, but he declined to offer details, citing the ongoing bidding process.

Messages left by phone and email with Texas Element were not returned.

Allen Click, a farmer, currently has a contract with the city of Austin **to access 540 acres at Hornsby Bend for hay production**.

Austin Water Utility spokesman Jason Hill said the city expects to make a decision by the end of the year.

Denali officials have said their permit applications meet or exceed all environmental rules.

The safe application of biosolids to the land for crop production is well-known by those who understand the chemistry and the process, and the (Texas Commission on Environmental Quality) approval process insures environmental protection,+the company said in a statement explaining its permit applications.

The company provides the service to roughly 30 Texas cities, providing an option for the beneficial use of their biosolids, as opposed to filling up the local landfills,+said Mike Cook, an environmental manager for Denali.

The Bastrop permit, if it's approved, could be used for cities in Bastrop and surrounding counties, he said.

The company said that a small portion of the ranch is in the 100-year flood plain of Cedar Creek but

that the area is more than 10 miles upstream of the Colorado River.

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

## Neighbors divided

"You start talking about wastewater sludge, and it scares the living daylights out of people," said Hazel Clinton, whose Hy Court Farm neighbors Wallace's ranch.

She said she was anxious initially, but after talking with officials in Austin "I'm not nearly as concerned," she said. "It's probably going to be well-regulated."

But Jo Ann Queen, who shares a fence line with Wallace, said she is "very, very concerned" about the possibility of sludge disposal.

"My only source of water is a well, and my place is downhill from his," Queen said. "Any kind of pollution or tainting would impact that."

She said the property is down a narrow country road, making truck traffic dangerous. And she said she was worried about wind blowing the biosolids around.

"I see no reason to bring Austin sludge down my road," she said.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says sludge can be used as fertilizer for hay production and other ranching activities; TCEQ spokesman Andrew Keese said there are 58 sludge facilities similar to the one proposed in Bastrop that are permitted in the state.

"I hear two different sides," said Amy Fisher, another neighbor of Wallace's. Some farmers and ranchers tell her the sludge will act like normal fertilizer.

"But I don't know what's in it - this is our environment. He's doing it to save a bunch of money and fertilize his fields, and he takes good care of his property. We don't want to put ranches out of business, and we know how hard it is to do what he does. But I don't want to see our environment destroyed."

---

## What is sludge?

After waste is flushed down the toilet, mixing with drainage water from sinks and showers, it goes through a lengthy treatment: About 90 million gallons of wastewater a day is separated from 1 million

gallons of solids at Austin's two sewage treatment plants.

The sewage solids are then pumped to the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant.

In a series of steps meant to mirror our own bodily process, the solids are then passed through anaerobic digesters for about 60 days; bacteria in the digesters kill most disease organisms and reduce the volume of material. (The anaerobic bacteria produce methane gas as a byproduct of digestion; it is collected and recycled to produce heat for warming the anaerobic digesters and electricity for the plant.)

Finally, the solids are further pressed to remove remaining water.

That product is known as sludge.

**If you go ...**

Independent Texans will host a community meeting about the sludge application from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at the VFW in Rockne at 1503 FM 20.

---

## About the Author



**ASHER PRICE** Asher Price has covered energy and the environment for the American-Statesman since 2006.



## SIGN UP FOR NEWSLETTERS

Want more news? **Sign up** for free newsletters to get more of the Statesman delivered to your inbox.

---

## Reader Comments 12

---

## Next Up in News

### Affidavit: Downtown shooting suspect intended to harm different target

by Mark D. Wilson, American-Statesman Staff

Investigators believe the man suspected of fatally shooting a woman on Sixth Street and injuring four others early Sunday was targeting another...