

Company cleaning up its toxic-waste legacy

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Nearly 30 years ago, 21,000 barrels of toxic waste were buried in trenches cut into the clay-lined hills northeast of **Austin**. In addition, acidic wastes were poured into three pits at the site, which is just north of U.S. 290 and east of Giles Road. Now the owner of the property, Waste Management Inc., is preparing to excavate the industrial residues and dispose of them in a safer manner. Waste Management has earmarked up to \$10 million for the work, which could involve hauling hazardous waste to a suitable incinerator or **landfill** and burying less potent material in the company's municipal-waste **landfill**, which surrounds the 9.2-acre industrial-waste site.

"It's better to find a problem now and fix it than it is to bury your head in the sand," said Robert Barber, regional director of operations for Waste Management. "We want to be very careful here."

But some environmental activists say the company is not being careful enough. They contend that the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, which regulates **landfills**, has sanctioned a work plan with dangerous waste- sampling procedures, loose oversight and too little testing of samples.

The site contains a hodgepodge of materials, including solvents such as acetone and xylene, polyester resins, anti-foaming agents, grease trap fluids, sulfuric acid neutralized with limestone and lubricating oil tainted with phosgene and other compounds. Exposure to some of the substances, depending on their concentration and the length of exposure, could cause respiratory irritation, skin burns, dizziness and even death.

Rick Lowerre, an environmental lawyer in **Austin**, and Ken Kramer, director of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club, said the use of a probing device to extract samples of waste could rupture drums and cause leakage, fumes or a fire. They also complained that residents who live along Springdale Road to the west and in the Harris Branch subdivision to the northeast of the site should have been notified before the project began. The site is less than a mile from the nearest houses.

"I was surprised to learn that there was an industrial waste site

of this magnitude located in the **Austin** area," Kramer said.

The company and the conservation commission defended the testing and cleanup plan. Officials said the use of a truck-mounted, hydraulics-driven device to plunge sampling tubes deep into the ground is much safer than the alternative of bulldozing or digging by hand to expose waste.

The initial round of sampling was completed in January without incident, said Rusty Fusilier, an environmental engineer for Waste Management, which also operates under the names Longhorn Disposal and **Austin Community Landfill**. He said more sampling and testing would be

done later.

State and company officials said it was true that neighbors had not been notified. No law requires public notification for such a cleanup, which is being undertaken voluntarily by the company and not in response to an order or request from the conservation commission, said Susan Janek, manager of the agency's municipal waste regulatory section.

Company officials said they intended to inform residents once they had a better idea of how the cleanup would be done. Excavation of waste will not begin until June at the earliest, they said.

"It's always a good idea to inform the public," said Alexander Porter, a lawyer who lives in Harris Branch and serves as president of one of its municipal utility districts. "I'm not the least bit concerned in terms of health and safety. There's a huge buffer between us and any portion of that **landfill**."

The **Austin** Fire Department was unaware of the project until an inquiry by the American- Statesman. The department has no jurisdiction because Waste Management's property is just outside the city limits, but its crews nonetheless might be asked to help if an emergency should arise. After touring the site, David Fiero, the Fire Department's hazardous-materials chief, said he was

satisfied with the company's procedures for handling wastes.

Company and state officials say the waste in its current state -- buried beneath thick layers of clay -- poses no threat to the public, workers or the environment. Ground-water monitoring wells ringing the site show no evidence of contamination. However, none of the wells was drilled on the site itself, so officials cannot say with absolute certainty that no ground water has been tainted.

Barber said a cleanup would allow disposal under current environmental standards. The waste was buried in the early 1970s without a plastic liner, a practice that would be illegal today. Waste Management acquired the site along with the adjacent **landfill** in 1981.

Another reason to excavate the buried wastes is that the site occupies the center of the **landfill**, which Waste Management intends to operate for an additional 50 years. Dump trucks and earth-moving equipment must maneuver around it. ``It's in the way," Barber said.

Earth-moving machinery scrapes its way layer by layer into the soil that covers more than 21,000 steel drums containing toxic waste at a **landfill** owned by Waste Management Inc. Buried almost 30 years ago, the drums contain waste that today would be illegal to store in this manner. Company cleaning up its toxic legacy