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State requests EPA lead effort to put out St. Clair County fire

Federal agency will provide contractors with expertise in underground fires

MONTGOMERY, Ala. - At the request of the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will lead the effort to put out the underground fire at a privately operated vegetative waste disposal site near Moody in St. Clair County, ADEM announced today.

ADEM began collaborating early on with the EPA, the St. Clair County Commission and other local and state authorities about the appropriate course of action to take to extinguish the fire and eliminate the smoke that has raised concerns among area residents. The EPA will determine the most appropriate method to extinguish the fire, hire a contractor from its list of qualified vendors to perform the work, and oversee the process.

“Neither ADEM nor the county has the experience or expertise to put out a fire of this nature,” ADEM Director Lance LeFleur said. “The EPA utilizes contractors with experience and knowledge to do this type of work. ADEM and state and local officials have concluded the most effective and safe way to extinguish the fire is for the EPA to lead the effort, and we have entered into an arrangement with the EPA to make that happen.”

From the beginning of the fire, ADEM has made extinguishing it a top priority. But the underground fire poses extreme hazards to firefighters and other responders due to the risks of cave-ins and flare-ups, and the volume of vegetative matter that has been buried at the site over the years. ADEM has no staff or vendors it works with that can handle this type of fire.

However, LeFleur said ADEM has taken numerous steps to assist local leaders, including putting the St. Clair County Commission in contact with companies with experience in putting out underground fires. St. Clair County officials, who have been evaluating proposals from the companies, agreed this week that turning over the lead for extinguishing the fire to the EPA is the best option given its experience resolving these types of issues.

“We stand ready to assist the EPA in whatever manner we can,” County Commission President Stan Batemon said. “The most important thing is putting the fire out as fast as possible and bringing relief to residents in communities being affected by the smoke. The county is limited in what it can do. The EPA is clearly in the best position with its knowhow and resources to handle the fire. We believe this is a major step forward in identifying the best solution and taking action.”

At ADEM's request, the EPA has performed air testing at and the near the site. In addition, ADEM is doing water testing in nearby streams to determine possible impacts from runoff from the fire site.

It is not known at this point how long it will take to put out the fire, or who ultimately will be responsible for paying the EPA's costs. The EPA is expected to seek recovery costs from the private operator of the site.

Once the fire is out, ADEM will take appropriate enforcement actions against the operator. Such actions could involve penalties for impacts to air quality and open burning violations.

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