



**ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION DIVISION**

**Richard E. Dunn, Director**

**Northeast District**

745 Gaines School Road  
Athens, Georgia 30605  
706-369-6376

October 13, 2020

**Trip Report**

**Name of Site:** Cowart Mulch Products  
Barrow County

**Address:** 1185 Barrow Industrial Pkwy  
Auburn, Georgia 30011

**Trip By:** Stephanie Cahill

**Accompanied By:** Tim Lewis, Yard Manager  
Cowart Mulch Products

Lieutenant Joseph Rinke  
Barrow County Fire Department

**Date(s) of Trip(s):** October 6-8, 2020

**Trip Report Provided To:** Bonnie Pope, Program Manager  
Derrick Williams, District Manager

The site visits were due to a complaint investigation for smoke / fire. Originally it was reported Patrick Inert Landfill was on fire. This was incorrect and verified by me via a site visit. The fire was located at Cowart Mulch Products, Auburn, Georgia, Barrow County.

**Tuesday, October 6, 2020, 12:35 PM** – I arrived at the above facility. I wore a facemask as a Covid-19 precaution. There was an active fire. The fire was on the northside at the midpoint of the length of the facility (photo attached). I met with Yard Manager Tim Lewis. I asked Mr. Lewis when the fire started and what is burning. Mr. Lewis said he got the call on Saturday (October 3, 2020) at around 5:00 PM from a neighbor. He said it was a large pile of wooden pallets. He did not know how the fire started. The facility is not open on the weekends. I asked what is being done for the fire. He said the fire department recommended they let the fire burn-out on its own. The fire department has been coming to check the fire every four hours. They last came at 9:30 AM. Mr. Lewis said they have a person onsite 24 hours to watch over the fire. I got the contact for the fire department from Mr. Lewis. I departed the facility at 12:50 PM.

**2:30 PM** – I spoke with Lieutenant Joseph Rinke of the Barrow County Fire Department. He confirmed Mr. Lewis’ explanation to allow the fire to burn-out. He continued to explain the fire is so hot it could spread if they put water on it. He has been checking the fire regularly. Lt. Rinke explained there has been other fires at the facility. This has become a concern. He is a trained fire investigator. Lt. Rinke suspects the facility may be burning on purpose. I asked if there are reports available for these fires. He said there were reports and it may be necessary for me to get an Open Records Request. I explained if the facility is burning on purpose this would be considered open burning which is not allowed. Further, if this is the case, it may be possible for my agency to address in a letter to the facility. Lt. Rinke requested my email to send me the county contact for an Open Records Request. I told him I would text it to him. We ended our call.

**4:17 PM** – Lt. Rinke texted me verifying I would need to submit an Open Records Request for the reports. And he had just left the site still a very active fire. There are pallets and trash all through the piles.

**Wednesday, October 7, 2020, 9:58 AM** – I received a voicemail from Lt. Rinke. I returned his call. Lt. Rinke said they are at the facility with fire trucks to put the fire out. The fire department received 17 calls overnight concerning the fire. After further inspection of the fire, it was determined there was lumber and trash burning not just pallets. He was requested by the fire chief to contact me to have me meet them at the facility to observe any environmental concerns. I told him I would be out soon and ended call.

Prior to departing for the facility, I spoke with District Manager Derrick Williams at the office to brief him on the developing situation.

**11:28 AM** – I arrived at the facility meeting with Lt. Rinke. I wore a facemask as a precaution for Covid-19. The fire department had already begun putting water on the fire (photo attached). I informed the facility I was onsite. Lt. Rinke and I began to walk toward the fire at a safe distance. I told Lt. Rinke I would like Tim Lewis to accompany us. He contacted Mr. Lewis. While waiting for Mr. Lewis, the smoke became very bad. I was not able to see anything. Lt. Rinke said they would likely be putting water on it all day. I told him I cannot really see anything now because of the smoke. I would need to come back when the smoke isn’t so bad. He agreed this would be a good idea. I departed the facility at 11:52 AM.

**3:50 PM** – I received a text from Lt. Rinke stating once the piles were dug out there was large amounts of trash. He sent two pictures. The pictures showed non-wood materials that looked like household trash. I asked him via text did he think the smoke would be clear enough for a morning visit. He replied yes it should be. I then planned a visit for the following morning.

**Thursday, October 8, 2020, 9:18 AM:** Before arriving at the facility, I experienced smoke across Hwy 316. I arrived meeting with Lt. Rinke. I wore a facemask as a Covid-19 precaution. I informed the facility I was onsite. Lt. Rinke said he believed the owner was onsite earlier this morning, and he has not heard from him at all concerning the fire. I told Lt. Rinke the owner appeared to be Chris Cowart. I have not spoken with him but plan to today. We walked to the area where the fire area. There were numerous piles still smoldering (photo attached). Toward the back of the fire area (west) there was a large amount of plastics (mostly plastic drink bottles with other miscellaneous plastics, food wrappers and some aluminum cans).

It appeared the plastics were compacted at some point because they were flattened (photo attached). I told Lt. Rinke I would need to interview Tim Lewis. We walked back to the intake office.

I interviewed Yard Manager Tim Lewis. I asked him what the non-wood material was in the fire area. He said he did not know and was not aware it was there. I asked him how long he had been working at the facility. He said he has worked for Cowart Mulch for six years at different locations. I asked him how long he has been working at this site. He replied one and a half to two years. He said the large green containers are for pallets. The containers are taken to a customer. The customer disposes of their pallets and sometimes people throw drink bottles into the containers. I said the materials found were multiple loads of material not a few random bottles coming in with pallet loads. He did not reply. Mr. Lewis said the leftover burnt mulch will be taken to GRP (Georgia Renewable Power). I asked Mr. Lewis if the owner was Chris Cowart. He replied yes. I requested Mr. Cowart's contact information. Mr. Lewis gave me his cell number and email address. The interview was ended.

I tried to contact owner Chris Cowart. I got his voicemail the mailbox was full. I sent him a text identifying myself requesting him to please call me. I departed the facility at 10:43 AM.

**12:40 PM:** Spoke with Lena Chambless of the EPD Recovered Materials Unit. She was needing the details of the Cowart Mulch fire. I briefed her, and I sent her Lt. Rinke's contact information via email as requested.

**1:29 PM** – Chris Cowart owner of Cowart Mulch returned my call. I explained I was at the facility in Barrow County this morning concerning the fire. I asked him about the non-wood materials that was part of the materials burnt in the fire. Mr. Cowart said the plastics at the site were food-waste from places like the Mercedes-Benz Stadium. The plastics are processed to remove food / liquids. Cowart Mulch receives the plastics then grinds and mixes with wood. The mixture is then taken to Pratt Industries in Conyers, Georgia to be burned for energy. Mr. Cowart added the mixture has not been taken recently. The plastics left over from the fire will be ground and mixed with wood then taken to Pratt within the next few weeks. I thanked Mr. Cowart for the information and ended the call.

**1:33 PM** – I called Lena Chambless to brief her on the details of my call with Mr. Cowart. Ms. Chambless thought Pratt Industries was no longer allowed to take plastics for burning. She said she would be out of office on Friday but would have someone check with the Air Protection Branch. This has not been confirmed to date and will need further inquiry.

Narrative Section end.

Photo Section follows on the next page.



Facing west active fire with fame and smoke. Photo taken near entrance and dumpster. Per Yard Manager Tim Lewis, he got the call from a neighbor on October 6, 2020 at 5:00 PM. Mr. Lewis stated it was a pile of pallets burning. The facility is closed on the weekends. He did not know how the fire started. The fire department recommended letting the fire burn-out on own. Photo taken by Stephanie Cahill on October 6, 2020.



Facing southwest the grinder machine is to my left. Fire department personnel were fighting the fire with two hoses in the distance to the right.  
Photo taken by Stephanie Cahill on October 7, 2020.



Facing southwest piles were still smoldering. Grinding machine was to the left behind me. The facility was in the process of turning over the piles to address hotspots. Photo taken by Stephanie Cahill on October 8, 2020.



Facing south beyond and west of the grinding machine. Large area of burned material including what appeared to be trash.  
Photo taken by Stephanie Cahill on October 8, 2020.



Facing south. The trash looking materials appeared to be plastics. The plastics were **mostly** drink bottles (soda, sport drink, water). There were some other miscellaneous items: other plastics, food wrappers and aluminum cans.

Photo taken by Stephanie Cahill on October 8, 2020.



Facing south close-up photos taken by Stephanie Cahill on October 8, 2020.

**END.**