

Sunset

From: Sunset
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To: Sunset
Subject: WEB EMAIL FEEDBACK

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City: Austin
State: TX

Organization: Environment Texas

Agency Name: Environmental Quality, Texas Commission on

Comments: According to the federal government, more than half of Texans live in areas where the air is unhealthy to breathe. Ozone, or smog, is formed from nitrogen oxides and volatile organic compounds, and is a powerful oxidant that burns and inflames our lungs and airways. Even at very low levels, ozone can cause chest pain and cough, aggravate asthma, reduce lung function, increase emergency room visits and hospital admissions for respiratory problems, lead to irreversible lung damage and to premature death.

This pollution not only costs Texans their health, but it's costing our families and our budget-strapped local and state governments significant amounts of money. A study commissioned by the City of Houston found that air pollution costs the metropolitan area some \$3 billion every year in health care costs, missed work days, etc.

Oil refineries and chemical plants contribute much of pollutants that create Texas' smog problem, as well emitting large amounts of highly toxic chemicals. In 2001, the facilities emitted an estimated 262 million pounds of toxic chemicals, linked by medical experts to cancer and other health problems, into Texas skies.

Much of the pollution emitted by the plants is illegal. According to the federal government, one in five oil refineries and chemical plants in Texas severely violated the Clean Air Act between July and September 2004. These plants also flaunt public health by exploiting loopholes that permit them to emit pollution accidentally, known as an "upset", without facing punishment.

State regulators at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) have a poor track record in holding environmental scofflaws accountable. According to a 2003 report by the State Auditor, the enforcement program at TCEQ "does not consistently ensure violators are held accountable".

To improve the permitting and enforcement functions at TCEQ, Environment Texas recommends increasing fees and penalties on polluters. This will make sure polluters - and not taxpayers - carry the burden for funding environmental programs and will better deter polluters from violating the law.

Resolution: Environment Texas endorses staff recommendations 4.2 and 8.1