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The Quest for Clean Air

As the deadline for complying with federal air quality standards draws near, Texas faces increased pressure to curb air pollutants in key regions.

Developments in 2003 will determine the fate of air cleanup efforts in Texas

Although air quality has been a challenge in parts of Texas for years, this environmental condition is not always evident, because poor air quality is often invisible. Unlike water or soil pollution, which is more likely to be seen or smelled, air emissions can linger for days and not be readily apparent, except for the monitoring results recorded by high-tech equipment.

Visible or not, ground-level ozone plagues several regions of Texas.

With federal compliance deadlines approaching and more than half the state's residents living in areas that do not meet federal standards for ozone, Texas has arrived at a critical juncture.

The urgency to address air quality is tied to health concerns and the 2007 deadline for reducing ozone levels. Failing to meet the deadline could result in federal sanctions.

Complicating the state's efforts is a recent court ruling that cost one of the leading clean air programs most of its start-up funding. The Legislature will examine this incentives program, which is operating with less than 20 percent of its expected funding, in the coming months.

The most immediate air quality concerns lie in the metropolitan areas of Houston-Galveston (eight counties), Dallas-Fort Worth (four counties), and Beaumont-Port Arthur (three counties), all of which are designated by the federal government as "nonattainment" for the 1-hour ozone standard. El Paso County also is designated nonattainment; however, emissions levels have shown significant improvements.

Moreover, other areas are being monitored for potential violations of the federal 8-hour ozone standard. These areas are Austin, San Antonio, Tyler, Longview-Marshall, Corpus Christi, Victoria, and several outlying counties around Dallas-Fort Worth. The Environmental Protection Agency's rules for this stricter standard will be proposed this spring.

In other articles in this issue, Natural Outlook examines crucial air quality issues and the possible penalties if federal deadlines lapse with the state still exceeding allowable levels of ozone. The consequences could be far-reaching.



The Texas sky frames the state Capitol. / photo by the Texas Department of Transportation

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