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PM Levels Looking Fine

State officials seek approval of air quality readings showing attainment for PM2.5.

The state of Texas is seeking to have all its counties declared in attainment of federal air quality standards for fine particulate matter (PM). The request was made by Gov. Rick Perry in a letter to Region 6 of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The governor reported that all areas of the state were in compliance with the federal standard, based on air quality monitoring data obtained from 2000 to 2002. Analysis by the TCEQ shows that all areas of Texas have complied with both the 24-hour and annual standards.

EPA is expected to make a preliminary response in July or August, with final designations coming in late 2004.

In 1997, EPA cited health concerns when it proposed standards for fine particulate matter, or PM2.5. Medical studies show an association with increased respiratory disease, decreased lung functions, and even premature death.

But implementation of the standards was delayed by a court challenge. With the litigation resolved and three years of required monitoring data now in hand, EPA is preparing for the first time to fully implement the PM2.5 standard in all states.

Particulate matter describes the particles from dust, dirt, and smoke that remain suspended in the air for long periods of time. Fine particles are so tiny they can only be detected with an electron microscope.

The primary sources are vehicle exhaust and industrial fuel combustion. Fine particles also are formed in the atmosphere when gases such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and volatile organic compounds are emitted by combustion activities and transformed by chemical reactions in the air. Large-scale agricultural burning or sand storms can produce huge volumes too.

Unlike ozone, which is invisible, particulate matter sometimes contributes to haze, obscuring skylines and even affecting visibility at parklands. Winds can carry pollution particles hundreds of miles from the source, even to remote areas like Big Bend National Park in West Texas.

EPA is formalizing air quality rules that will address visibility in national parks and regional transport--the movement of pollutants from one region to another. Texas and other states in the central and eastern United States might be notified that pollutants originating in their state, such as PM2.5, are affecting other states.

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