OPINION // EDITORIALS

Texas isn’t policing petrochemical plants [Editorial]

By **The Editorial Board**

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Smoke and fire fill the sky from a massive explosion at the TPC Group petrochemical plant on Wednesday, Nov. 27, 2019 in Port Neches, Texas.
Associated Press

The economic future of Texas is in large part tied to the petrochemical industry, which for years has been taking up the slack created by a decline in consumer demand for legacy oil and gas products such as gasoline.

That transition has made the Houston area home to the largest congregation of petrochemical operations in America and second largest in the world, providing more than a million jobs and nearly $265 billion to the state economy.

With that distinction, however, comes an ever-present peril that has reared its head much too frequently in recent months - a petrochemical plant fire or other mishap that endangers the health and safety of nearby residents.

The most recent incident required thousands of families about 90 miles from Houston in Port Neches, Groves, Nederland and parts of Port Arthur to flee from their homes on Thanksgiving eve after fire broke out at a TPC Group facility that manufactures chemical and petroleum-based products.

A mandatory evacuation order was lifted two days later only to be replaced by a voluntary evacuation advisory issued Wednesday for Port Neches after air-quality monitors detected elevated levels of butadiene, a known carcinogen. Butadiene can also cause dizziness, nausea and headaches.

The proximity of petrochemical plants to homes, schools, hospitals, parks and other populated areas makes it vitally important for Texans to have confidence in the state agency responsible for ensuring their environmental safety. Unfortunately, it's becoming harder and harder to do that.

A new study by the Environmental Integrity Project shows Texas is one of the top five states to drastically cut funding for pollution-control programs between fiscal years 2008 and 2018. Wisconsin cut its funding by 36 percent, but Texas and Louisiana were right behind it with 35 percent cuts, closely followed by North Carolina, Delaware and New York.

Texas reduced its pollution monitoring budget from $578 million to $374 million during that 10-year period, the EIP report said, while staffing within the Texas Commission on Environment fell 9 percent, from 2,884 to 2,616 full-time positions.

The overall state budget increased 41 percent during that same period, so this wasn't just about spending. The implication instead is that the state's stewards, from the governor to the head of the TCEQ, have been more concerned with protecting the cash-cow petrochemical industry than safeguarding public health.

If that assessment is wrong, it's easy enough for the governor and the TCEQ to prove it by not only investing more in pollution monitoring but also getting tougher with persistent rule breakers.

TPC Group, for example, has been fined more than $100,000 for air pollution violations during the last five years. That's chump change for a multimillion-dollar operation. When companies pollute our air or water, they should be hit hard enough to hurt.

No doubt motivated by two Houston-area petrochemical plant fires within two weeks of each other — including the KMCO blaze in April that killed a worker — the Texas Legislature during its last session did increase its funding for TCEQ by about 2.2 percent, to to $729.7 million.

That additional funding won't mean much, though, if the state agency conducts business as usual. Too seldom does the TCEQ ask the state to sue big-pocketed polluters who ignore environmental laws.

Attorney General Ken Paxton did file suits alleging environmental violations after the KMCO fire and another blaze at the Intercontinental Terminals Co. storage facility. That was progress. But environmentalists complained even then that the state isn't aggressive enough, and it remains to be seen whether Paxton's response to those fires signals a new willingness to get tough in order to keep Texans safe from petrochemical disasters.

Companies accustomed to low fines and settlements for behavior that threatens people's lives will simply write off those amounts as another cost to do business in Texas. That cost must be higher to get them to change their ways.

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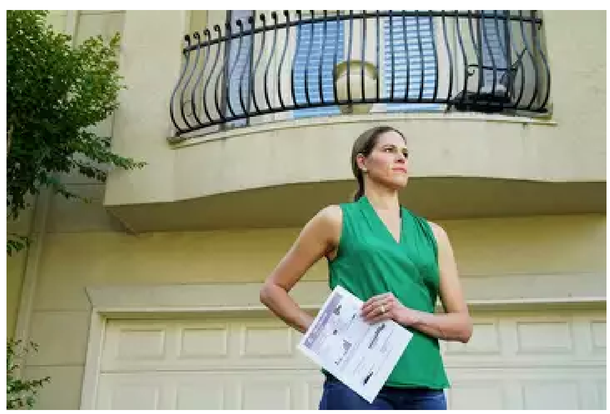

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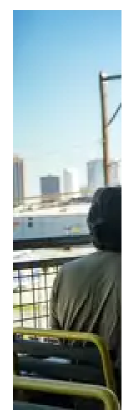

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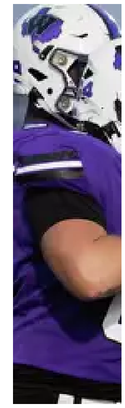

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