

TOXIC TEXAS: HEALTH, ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS SAY “ROADMAP” NEEDED TO CLEAN UP “TOXIC HOT SPOTS” IN 14 LONE STAR STATE COMMUNITIES

New Report Comes As Industry in Houston Misses Mayor’s May 1 Deadline for Cleaning Up Major Pollutants

HOUSTON, TX.//May 1, 2008// Texas residents are exposed to 14 known “toxic hotspots” that are not being addressed currently by industry, federal regulators and state officials and will require a major initiative to protect the public’s health, according to a new report issued today by Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention (GHASP), Industry Professionals for Clean Air, Houston; Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), Austin; and Environmental Integrity Project (EIP), Austin.

Using Houston – where industry today misses the Houston mayor’s May 1, 2008 deadline for cleaning up certain toxic air emissions – as a case study to illustrate the threat to Lone Star state residents, the study also identifies 13 other Texas areas as “toxic hot spots” (in alphabetical order): Bastrop, Beaumont, Bowie/Cass County, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Evadale (Jasper County), Freeport, Galena Park and Lynchburg Ferry (Harris County), Port Arthur, Port Neches and Texas City.

The dangerous airborne pollutants with long- and short-term health effects in these communities include arsenic, benzene, butyraldehyde, hydrogen sulfide, styrene, and more than half a dozen others with known adverse health impacts.

Titled, ***“Houston, We Have a Problem: A Roadmap for Reducing Petrochemical Industry Toxic Emissions in the Lone Star State,”*** the report notes: “As the petrochemical capital of the United States, the Houston area is at the center of a toxics storm. Numerous studies have documented dangerous levels of toxic air pollution in the Houston area, including the Milby Park and Galena Park neighborhoods. Communities in other industrialized areas throughout Texas face similar toxic threats. Refineries and chemical plants along the Texas Gulf Coast are major contributors to toxic hotspots in Beaumont, Corpus Christi, Freeport, Port Arthur, Port Neches, and Texas City.”

Ilan Levin, senior attorney, Environmental Integrity Project, said: “Unfortunately, Texans cannot count on federal or state government to protect their health. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s industrial toxics program is woefully lacking, and, doesn’t address the real-world impacts of toxic pollution on people living along the fencelines of refineries and chemical plants. Texas politicians haven’t helped the situation because they’ve been unable or unwilling to place adequate limits on industrial toxic air emissions to protect the health of Texans. As a result, Texas industry is not being made to use the best available pollution controls, and cities like Houston, are struggling to protect their residents’ health.”

Matthew Tejada, PhD, executive director, Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention, Houston, said: “Houstonians have long been demanding a roadmap that clearly shows how we can achieve significant reductions in levels of air toxics. Our federal and state officials and local industry leaders have failed to put together that roadmap, and citizens of the Houston region have suffered because of their failings. Our hope is that the roadmap in our report will help reduce toxic emissions and better protect the public health not only of Houston’s exposed populations, but of all Texans who live in the shadow of industry’s toxic pollution.”

Hilton Kelley, Port Arthur resident and director of Community InPower and Development Association, said: “For years the people in the Port Arthur-Beaumont area have had to bear the brunt of oil refining so that the rest of the nation can have gasoline. And, because of the toxins that are released into the air from the refineries and chemical plants, we suffer from various air related illnesses like asthma, bronchitis, liver and kidney disease, and a high rate of cancer and skin disorders. Enough is enough. Our health and our kids’ health is at stake.”

Suzie Canales, of Corpus Christi said: “The people living around here all report the same health problems, not to mention the severe emotional stress from living close to these dangerous plants.

Refineries and chemical plants have a moral obligation to the community to reduce toxic emissions by implementing this report's recommendations."

Ramon Alvarez, PhD, senior scientist, Environmental Defense Fund, Austin, said, "Solutions to toxic hot spots exist, but we lack the leadership and will power from state government and corporate management to make them happen. In Houston and other areas with high toxics levels, all plants should employ industry-proven best practices to minimize harmful emissions."

HOUSTON CASE STUDY

Recent studies by the City of Houston, local universities, and medical schools have documented dangerous levels of toxic air pollution in parts of the city. The City of Houston recently identified 12 chemicals that are present in the air at levels that pose a definite health risk.

A study by Rice University, Baylor College of Medicine, Texas Southern University, University of Houston Law Center and the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston looked in detail at four pollutants and found: "Mounting evidence demonstrates that the population of Southeast Texas is exposed to disproportionate levels of toxic air pollutants considered to be a health risk to this population. In Southeast Texas, benzene, 1,3-butadiene, formaldehyde, and diesel particulate matter (diesel PM) have been identified as particularly pernicious pollutants requiring priority regulation. Based on the toxicological information and the concentrations seen in the Houston area for the selected four air pollutants, it is clear that large portions of the city have ambient air concentrations posing a risk higher than one excess cancer death in every 100,000 people. Observed concentrations of 1,3-butadiene and diesel PM approach a level indicating risk greater than one excess cancer death per 10,000 people."

In November 2007, Houston Mayor Bill White, frustrated by industry's foot-dragging, gave local industries six months, until May 1, 2008, to clean up air toxics.

"ROADMAP" TO CLEANER AIR

As the new report notes: "Existing ambient air monitoring data confirms that toxic hotspots warrant immediate action in urban areas such as Houston. These hotspots are the result of inadequate public health consideration by environmental regulators, and the absence of concerted remedial action by industry and government to reduce ambient toxics to safe levels ... For the air to be safe to breathe for all the state's residents, Texas industry leaders must do their part to clean up toxic emissions. The following roadmap lays out minimum actions that refining and petrochemical companies should be undertaking to protect the health of their fellow Texans."

According to the report, the federal government should:

- Improve toxic monitoring and reporting requirements, including requiring the use of new technologies for measuring facility-wide emissions;
- Consider aggregate and cumulative impacts of toxic emissions in regulatory determinations;
- Require information regarding the health impacts of chemicals before they are released to the market; and
- Adopt legislation to identify and assist in the cleanup of local toxic hotspots.

The state of Texas should:

- Adopt enforceable ambient toxic standards;

- Adopt hotspots legislation requiring state or local governments to identify and clean up local areas with unsafe ambient levels of air toxics; and
- Encourage local governments to implement programs to protect residents from adverse health effects due to toxic air pollution.

Industry should:

- Make toxic pollution reduction a company priority, second only to safety;
- Increase toxics monitoring and verify the accuracy of emissions estimates;
- Use current best available technologies and management practices to reduce toxic emissions, including: Flare gas recovery to eliminate routine flaring; Passive Optical Gas Imaging to identify unknown sources of leaks, and supplement storage tank and wastewater monitoring programs; venting to controls for storage tanks with potentially large toxic emissions; additional speciation requirements for cooling tower monitoring and deadlines for leak repair; and use of fuel gas recovery systems and best management practices to reduce delayed coker emissions; and
- Support reasonable regulatory proposals, instead of hiding behind publicly unaccountable lobbying firms and trade associations.

ABOUT THE GROUPS

Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention's mission is to persuade government and corporate officials to prevent smog. GHASP seeks to accomplish its mission by being the most credible advocate for clean air in the Houston region; by supporting efforts to educate the public and intensify the political climate; and by directly engaging government officials, community leaders, the media and industry on regional air pollution issues. For more information, visit www.ghasp.org.

Industry Professionals for Clean Air is a group of petroleum and petrochemical industry professionals who are concerned about the slow progress toward clean air in the Houston region. We are enlisting like-minded individuals who can offer their expertise in plant operations, economics, design and environmental controls. For more information, visit www.ipcahouston.org.

A leading national nonprofit organization, Environmental Defense Fund represents more than 500,000 members. Since 1967, Environmental Defense Fund has linked science, economics, law and innovative private-sector partnerships to create breakthrough solutions to the most serious environmental problems. For more information, visit www.edf.org.

The Environmental Integrity Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to more effective enforcement of anti-pollution laws. EIP's research and reports shed light on how environmental laws affect public health. EIP works closely with communities seeking to enforce these laws. For more information, visit www.environmentalintegrity.org.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A streaming audio replay of this news event will be available on the Web at <http://www.toxictexas.org> as of 7 p.m. CDT on May 1, 2008.