
HOUSTON IN ATTAINMENT FOR PM2.5, AVOIDS EPA PENALTY THREAT

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Published: 05/04/2010 - 09:16

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
TUESDAY, MAY 4, 2010
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HOUSTON IN ATTAINMENT FOR PM2.5, AVOIDS EPA PENALTY THREAT *State, City, County, and Other Entities Work Together to Reduce Tiny Particle Levels*

In another example of Texas' improving air quality, the EPA announced that it agrees with the TCEQ, and that the Houston area is meeting federal guidelines for a type of particulate matter called PM2.5. PM2.5, which is composed of tiny particles less than 2.5 micrometers in diameter, can be hazardous in heavy concentrations.

"This is good news for Houston-area citizens, who will be spared the threat of new federal regulations that could burden economic recovery and development," said TCEQ Chairman Bryan W. Shaw, Ph.D. "The TCEQ saw the possibility that PM2.5 levels at one particular monitor could some day exceed federal requirements, and took proactive steps to reduce levels and prevent that from happening."

There are three PM2.5 monitors in Houston, but only the Clinton Drive monitor, located in an industrial area near the Ship Channel, showed elevated readings. Electron microscopy showed that a large portion of the Clinton monitor samples consisted of soil and dust particles.

To reduce PM2.5 levels, the TCEQ enlisted the aid of the EPA; the City of Houston; Harris County; Port of Houston Authority; Port Terminal Rail Authority; and local industry. A nearby parking lot was paved; barriers were installed to prevent trucks from driving on dusty shoulders; new, cleaner railroad engines were put into service; and many other actions were taken, including voluntary dust reductions from industry and enhanced dust suppression requirements.

"We were pleased and thankful that we received such meaningful cooperation from so many organizations in the Houston area," said TCEQ Commissioner Buddy Garcia. "It shows what can be accomplished when everyone works together toward a common goal."

The PM2.5 levels at the monitor came down, from the highest annual average reading of 16.0 micrograms per cubic meter to the latest average of 12.6 micrograms per cubic meter. Overall PM2.5 averages in Houston also declined, from 13.2 micrograms per cubic meter to 11.9 micrograms per cubic meter. The federal standard for PM2.5 is 15.0 micrograms per cubic meter.

"This is just the latest news in the positive trend in Texas air quality," said TCEQ Commissioner Carlos Rubinstein. "Houston is meeting federal ozone standards for the first time, air toxics levels are coming down, and these good air quality stories are happening all over the state."

Another important factor in the reductions is that the EPA recognized that many high monitor readings were caused by exceptional events that Texas does not control, such as smoke from agricultural burning in Central America and fine dust from Saharan dust storms. Readings were adjusted accordingly.

Due to these changes to reduce dust in the area, and further restrictions on maritime and industrial emissions, the levels should continue to decline.

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