

## Revisions to Houston Clean Air Plan Proposed

Intense scientific scrutiny, a legal challenge from business and industry, and a reduction in the air quality benefit from the 55-mph speed limit form the latest proposed change to the Houston-Galveston area clean air plan by the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC).

This week the three-member commission OK'd for public comment a set of unique revisions designed to increase the effectiveness of the strategy. After the public comment period, the Commission will finalize the updated plan. "This is a critical juncture in the continuing development of the Houston-area clean air plan," said TNRCC Chairman Robert J. Huston. "We continue to use better science to understand the complex formation of ozone in Houston. It remains a significant challenge but we are committed to healthy air quality for everyone in this region." Commissioner Ralph Marquez said information gathered during the \$20 million Texas 2000 air quality study is proving invaluable.

"We have always been determined to rely on sound science to improve air quality for citizens and meet the requirements of the federal Clean Air Act," Marquez said. "With each revision, this plan is becoming more productive."

The Commission also applauded Governor Rick Perry's directive announced Tuesday that the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDot) use cleaner diesel fuel in its vehicle fleet. The directive also includes retooling of the TxDot fleet to low- or zero-emission vehicles.

One proposal includes several new rules designed to control the release from industrial facilities of certain highly reactive compounds known to accelerate the formation of ground-level ozone. The compounds' contribution to Houston's air pollution became apparent as part of an intensive, ongoing study of ozone formation. Greater reductions of these emissions—part of a class of compounds known as Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs)—may allow the TNRCC to adjust the current strategy to reduce nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions by as much as 90 percent.

The proposed rules—which apply to vents, cooling towers, flares and so-called "fugitive" emissions—resulted from a lawsuit filed in January 2001 by a group of Houston-area businesses and industries (Business Coalition for Clean Air-Appeals Group, or BCCA-AG) regulated by the TNRCC.

The group sued the agency to block part of the clean air plan approved by the Commission in December 2000. As part of an agreement between the parties and approved by State District Judge Margaret Cooper of Austin, the TNRCC was required to concentrate on the reduction of industrial VOC emissions.

The second major proposal postpones the 55-mph speed limit currently in place for passenger cars and light trucks until May 1, 2005. In the interim, the TNRCC will conduct a study to determine if benefits of the passenger car/light truck speed limit reduction can be replaced by other measures. The 55-mph speed limit will remain in place for vehicles weighing at least 10,000 pounds, according to the proposal.

The third major proposal is designed to reduce the current 56 ton per day (tpd) shortfall in NOx emissions by 25 percent. The proposal articulates reductions expected from energy efficiency programs and from the Texas Emissions Reduction Plan. Public hearings on the proposals will be held 2 p.m. Thursday, July 18, at the TNRCC Headquarters in Austin; 10 a.m. Monday, July 22, at the City of Houston Council Chambers, 901 Bagby; and 7 p.m. Monday, July 22, at the Flukinger Community Center, 16003 Lorenzo, in Channelview.