

As Dallas area tries to clean up air, EPA might end tailpipe tests for older cars



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One in an occasional series

A smog check for an aging car involves a make-believe drive inside an inspection shop. But that simulated jaunt might be headed toward the scrap heap.

With an older car's wheels on rollers, the inspector sticks a probe in the tailpipe, shifts into gear and hits the gas.

Part of smog-fighting strategies in smoggy areas such as North Texas for years, tailpipe tests have helped to keep tons of pollution out of the air.

But the Environmental Protection Agency says they've become as outdated as in-dash cassette decks. Among ideas the EPA raised last year was dropping or phasing out the test for old cars.

The agency said too few remain on the road to justify the investment — perhaps \$40,000 for equipment and a \$4,000 yearly service contract. Gear to test newer cars costs two-thirds less.

North Texas clean-air planners want to keep the old-car tests, saying a few aged models make lots of smog. The region needs all the pollution cuts it can find, they say.

But many shop owners want to stop spending so much to serve a shrinking market.

Mike Nowels, executive director of the Texas State Inspection Association, said any driver can tell an older car is polluting too much by just rolling down the window.

The Plano-based group represents shops that do safety and emissions tests.

"If your car stinks going down the road, it's probably not running well," Nowels said, acknowledging skipping over some technical details.

"That 'sniff test' can tell you an awful lot."

'A fairly good chunk'

Regional planners say they still need the roller machine, called a dynamometer, and its computerized sniffer to help clean up Dallas-Fort Worth's air.

"It does net a fairly good chunk of emissions reductions," said Chris Klaus, senior program manager at the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

The council, based in Arlington, handles local clean-air strategy. Getting high-polluting older cars tested and repaired or retired is part of the plan.

Cars in North Texas get smog checks from their brand-new date until they become exempt at 25 years old. This year, models from 1990-2014 get inspections.

The dynamometer test currently applies to cars from model years 1990-95.

In North Texas, 11 percent of pre-1996 cars tested in 2012 flunked. Among 1996 and newer cars, just 4 percent failed. An older failure puts out 1 1/2 times as much pollution as a younger one.

The figures are from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Cars aren't the only air polluters in North Texas. Big industries, small companies, machinery and products also make emissions that form ozone, or smog.

As a group, vehicles are Dallas-Fort Worth's biggest local source of nitrogen oxides. That is one type of ozone-forming pollution and the main target of cleanup plans, although other types also play a role.

North Texas' levels of ozone, a damaging pollutant, are higher than the EPA's national health standard. Measurements show that air-quality improvements have stalled in recent years, Klaus said.

Increased pressure

The EPA could tighten the standard soon to reflect medical studies of ozone's health effects. That would increase pressure to cut emissions.

"The region cannot afford to lose real-world emissions reductions," the council of governments' transportation director, Michael Morris, wrote to the EPA last year. He urged the EPA to keep the old-car tailpipe tests.

Local planners also note that cars can last longer in Texas than in northern states, where longer, harder winters bring heavy doses of corrosive road salt. That slows the turnover rate.

Any car's emissions can rise with age, but on average, older cars started off dirtier than today's models and stayed that way.

"Cars are getting very, very clean and are getting to the point where there are virtually zero emissions" of ozone-forming pollution, Klaus said. That doesn't count greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide.

Still, North Texas should keep the tailpipe tests until nearly all pre-1996 cars have been retired or reached their 25-year exemption age, he said.

Since 1996, new cars sold in the U.S. have had onboard diagnostics. The current generation is called OBD II. It's what triggers the check-engine light. A plug-in scanner finds trouble codes. The codes tell what needs attention.

When a 1996 or younger car in North Texas gets its yearly check, the inspector makes sure the check-engine light and its underlying system are working. If the test turns up no problems, the car passes.

Cars before 1996 don't have OBD. Their tests come on a dynamometer with the drive wheels turning as they would on the road.

The Texas Department of Public Safety, which regulates inspection shops, says it's "like a stress test for your vehicle."

If the shop's computer measures emissions below prescribed levels, the car passes.

Dwindling numbers

When emissions inspections began, only 20 percent of cars had OBD, said Nowels of the inspection association. Tailpipe-test equipment was used often enough to justify the investment, he said.

By 2012, only 6 percent of emissions inspections in North Texas were tailpipe tests, according to the TCEQ.

"That percentage of the fleet has become statistically so small," Nowels said. "I think everybody realizes that their day has pretty much passed."

A dynamometer and analyzer from a state-approved vendor costs about \$26,000 to \$38,000, the TCEQ says. An annual service contract is about \$3,500 to \$4,900.

Equipment for OBD II testing is about \$7,500, with a service contract of about \$1,200 a year, the TCEQ says.

In North Texas, the state caps the combined safety and emissions fee at \$39.75, regardless of the car's age or which emissions test it

requires.

Even with such needed investments, the number of shops in Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston-Galveston-Brazoria that inspect emissions jumped 20 percent from 2003-11.

That's one finding in a 2012 report for the TCEQ by Eastern Research Group Inc. The TCEQ hired the consultants to find out if fees that shops get are high enough to cover the costs of inspections.

According to the consultants' economic modeling, about three-fourths of the shops should have enough income from inspections to cover their costs.

But the real world might prove otherwise. In surveys, more than half of the shops told the consultants that inspection fees don't cover their costs.

Inspections might yield repairs, one possible reason for offering them. But most shops reported that inspection-related repairs made up just a small share of their income.

It's clear that the dynamometer test is on its way out eventually, Nowels said. But what might replace it in the meantime isn't clear.

"Nobody has thought of a good exit strategy," he said.

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txrider6

pretty interesting report. i drive a `99 Ford pick up truck even i know its aging i try to keep it as clean as i can. air pollution its about everyone of us (individually).

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Askaran Singh

South of Dallas, in Midlothian, sits the country's largest concentration of cement plants, a major polluter in North TX. And areas downwind, like Denton, tend in reality the strength of the pollution.

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If I read the story right, the EPA wants to cut regulation and locals want to keep it. That can't be correct.

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Clean up the air, oh my, that goes against everything the gop stands for.

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Jim Schermbeck

Isn't this the same EPA that sponsored the recent "Cash for Clunkers" program to get older, more polluting cars off the road? In 2007, the average age of cars on the road was a little over 10 years. Today it's a little over 11 years. We need to keep this program in place as long as DFW is in violation of the Clean Air Act. But it would be nice if EPA and the

2 days ago