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Doctors' groups press EPA for much stricter federal ozone limit

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ARLINGTON — The top doctors' organizations in Texas and Dallas County, along with other groups and individuals, pressed hard on Thursday for a much tougher federal limit on ozone, or smog.

They told Environmental Protection Agency officials at an all-day hearing that Texas needs federal action on clean air because the state hasn't acted.

A senior Texas official defended the state's record and told the EPA that a proposed smog crackdown isn't needed. Representatives of coal mining, natural gas, petroleum, manufacturing and chemicals echoed the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's assessment.

However, Dr. Robert Haley of Dallas, an internist and epidemiologist, attacked their contention that health isn't at stake in where the EPA sets a new standard for ozone.

Haley spoke for the Dallas County Medical Society and the Texas Medical Association, which he said "strongly endorse" toughening the federal ozone standard from its current 75 parts per billion down to 60 ppb. EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy has proposed a range of 65-70 ppb but is taking comments on the possibility of 60 ppb.

Dallas-Fort Worth's average level for 2011-14 was 81 ppb.

Haley said a new study used a computer model to see what effect a 10-ppb reduction would have had in 2008 for 10 North Texas counties, including Dallas and Tarrant. Experts found that cleaner air would have meant 320 fewer hospitalizations, \$10 million less in hospitalization costs, 77 fewer premature deaths and \$617 million less in economic losses tied to those deaths.

“As physicians who care for those patients and see the asthma attacks, respiratory failure, hospitalizations and premature deaths, we believe that the citizens of these 10 counties are paying a high price for ozone pollution that could potentially be avoided,” Haley said.

David Brymer, the TCEQ’s air quality director, told EPA officials that the state agency found little or no evidence of health harm. The existing standard already protects the public and a tighter one would not prevent breathing problems or other ills, he said.

“We all share the common goal” of clean air, Brymer said.

Industries agreed with the TCEQ, which regulates their emissions. They also said a lower ozone limit would kill jobs.

Austin lawyer Christina Wisdom, speaking for the Texas Association of Manufacturers, said a stricter standard would not be in the nation’s best interest and would “decimate” Texas jobs just to make a “feel-good” change.

Texas Chemical Council President Hector Rivero, whose group represents chemical manufacturers, said science doesn’t support a tighter standard. He also repeated a frequent assertion of opponents — that changing the standard before all violator cities have met the current standard is “moving the goal line.”

But Frank O’Donnell, president of the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group Clean Air Watch, asked where someone with a breathing problem would go for diagnosis and treatment — “to a doctor or to an oil-company lobbyist?”

Environmentalists said only federal pressure has led to clean-air progress in Texas. “I have no doubt that it would be much worse” without it, said Christine Guldi of Dallas.

Susybelle Gosslee of the League of Women Voters of Dallas told the EPA that Texas hasn’t made an honest attempt to clean the air. Zac Trahan, D/FW program director of the Texas Campaign for the Environment, said the TCEQ’s disbelief in ozone’s health harm had led the state agency to adopt a goal of “close enough.”

And Jim Schermbeck, director of the North Texas clean-air group Downwinders at Risk, said the public was relying on the EPA instead of state officials.

“Only strong federal action can salvage the situation and give Texans safe, legal air to breathe,” he said.

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Kim Feil

4 days ago

I told the EPA that we consume too much and that manufacturing is a zero sum game to the environment in making unnecessary trinkets. That kids in some other countries see real beauty in where they live and cited some children that visited recently from Africa that couldn't wait to get back home (weren't hooked on computer gadgets & their necks didn't hurt). I bet all this DFW concrete was ugly to them! I pointed out that the other clean air advocates that spoke before me wanting the coal plants to switch to natural gas got it wrong. That all the methane leaks are hurtling us towards extinction. They will only switch back to coal when

the price of natural gas goes up. I said that while the fossil fuel industry brought our country to prosperity, that wind and solar is now on parity pricing with fossil fuels and that the era of fossil fuels must come to an end. I recognize, however, that we still need the big energy players to help us transition to renewables (base demand/grid building/infrastructures/fueling stations, etc...jobs!!). I said that with low crude prices coupled with a lower ozone standard set at 60 ppb (but aim for 35) will put a squeeze on the energy industries to change their business models before we lose that window of opportunity to avert run-away global warming. I said that TCEQ doesn't believe in manmade Global Warming but that our EPA does. That you, EPA, have the power to change/save the world with your leadership. I said that we must act now if we want to continue to exist as a human species on this ever increasing hostile planet. I ran out of speaking time, but got in that our TCEQ (SIP) State Implementation (to ozone compliance) Plan does not include the emissions from wildfires and all these fossil fuel & chemical related accidents that are proliferating with the expansion of fracking. Just today a huge steel plant fire billowed smoke our way from Midlothian. Accounting for emissions from fracking and emissions from accidents or Acts of God must be considered in how we meet ozone standards.

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Kim Feil

4 days ago

more pics and info on this link <https://barnettshalehell.wordpress.com/2015/01/30/epa-smog-ozone-public-hearing-in-arlington-gasland-texas-2015/>

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C_K27

4 days ago

"We all share the common goal" of clean air, Brymer said.

This is an absolute lie! His goal is maximizing profits for industry. We can disagree on what level of pollution is "safe" but don't lie and pretend like you care about clean air over the bottom line.

Reply Share

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Andy Howe

4 days ago

Whenever I see any type of rally (or whatever you want to call it) with a bunch of professionally printed signs saying the same thing that are being handed out to people (and in this case apparently T-shirts as well), I always wonder who is behind it. Perhaps DMN should have looked at one of the signs and see if it identified the lobbying group or industry or whatever that paid for them.

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Randy Loftis

4 days ago

Hi Andy, I put your question to Matthew Johnson, communications director for the Sierra Club's Lone Star chapter, their statewide organization. Here's Matt's reply:

"This is a common practice for stakeholder groups to do this. Sierra Club provided the shirts and signs for this rally. We made them available to any and all supporters that showed up who wanted one.

"In this example, the rally was co-organized by several groups and individuals in favor of a stronger smog standard. We were just the ones who brought the t-shirts and swag. No hidden agenda, just our own point-of-view shared by volunteer supporters. It's a good tool to help unite like-minded organizations and individuals in the moment."

Reply Share

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John Karney

4 days ago

What's the use. We have Mexico on our border. We can't keep the illegals nor the pollution from crossing over.

Reply Share 1 reply

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Randy Loftis

4 days ago

Hi John, I can't address immigration, but I can address the science of pollution transport from Mexico. It's not perfectly understood except in the local cases of U.S. cities on the border, where there's a lot of data. Scientists don't have as much detail to see how transported pollution might affect cities far from the border, but they have some indications.

In broad terms, international pollution might make a difference in some places. But pollution that originates closer to a city generally has a bigger influence. So Mexico (and Canada in the Northeastern U.S. -- as well as U.S. emissions drifting to Canada) are factors to consider, but they're probably not making the difference overall.

Reply Share

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Gary

4 days ago

"Representatives of coal mining, natural gas, petroleum, manufacturing and chemicals echoed the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's assessment"

I'm sure they did. Probably even provided the assessment for them. Makes you wonder who works for who.

Reply Share

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Judy Keith

4 days ago

It is clear that it will take federal action to clean up Texas air. This state doesn't believe in letting its citizens breathe clean air. We shouldn't ever have "orange, red or purple days" in a state where the wind blows just about 24/7.

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