

**BRIEF ANALYSIS**

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Clearing the Air About the Bush Environmental Record

By H. Sterling Burnett

Presumptive Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush's environmental record as Texas governor has come under heightened scrutiny for two reasons. First, his record could indicate the types of policies he would pursue as president. Second, his likely opponent, Vice President Al Gore, is closely associated with environmental causes. Gore wrote a book warning of an impending environmental crisis, was chosen as President Clinton's running mate in 1992 largely to garner the environmental vote and is often touted as an environmental leader by groups pressing "green" issues.

Critics of Gov. Bush including Gore, the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) have blasted his environmental record. LCV president Deb Callahan claimed that Bush's "tenure as governor . . . is marked . . . [by] worsening air quality and a general governing philosophy that, if applied nationally, would jeopardize three decades of national environmental progress."

Bush's critics cite two items to make their case: (1) Texas ranks number one on the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency's Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) and (2) Houston recently surpassed Los Angeles as the city with the "dirtiest" air in the nation. Both claims, while technically accurate, are misleading. Further, the critics ignore the significant environmental progress that Texas has made since Bush became governor in 1995, even as the state's population and economy have burgeoned.

Toxic Releases. Toxic releases measured by the EPA fell by 14 percent in Texas from 1995 to 1997, compared to an average of 1.5 percent for all states, and during that period Texas reduced the amount of toxic chemicals released into the environment by 42 million pounds —

more than any other state [see Figure I]. Even with the reductions, Texas still ranked first in 1997, releasing 261 million pounds of toxic chemicals. Does that mean that Texas is a big polluter? Or a dangerous polluter? Surprisingly, *there is no way to tell based on EPA figures*. TRI ratings are neither accurate nor meaningful measures of the risk posed to people or the environment from chemical releases.

- Only companies that employ more than 10 people or use more than 10,000 pounds of listed chemicals must report releases, so a large company that accidentally releases one pound of cyanide into the atmosphere is requested to report the release, but a small company that releases 8,000 pounds is not.
- In addition to actual releases, the Toxic Release Inventory counts as a "release" shipments of chemicals from one company to another, shipments from a company to a landfill (even if required by law) and on- or off-site recycling or reuse of listed chemicals.
- The Toxic Release Inventory considers only the number of pounds of a chemical released, without regard to its danger, so, as the Reason Foundation has pointed out, releasing 20 million pounds of acetone (used in paint remover and nail polish remover) into the air would make a state's rating look worse than releasing 1,000 pounds of phosgene (a poison gas).

FIGURE I
Decline in Toxic Releases
1995-97



Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

42 days of violations. In addition, Texas had 27 of the 30 highest ozone readings in the nation — most of them in Houston. However, Houston's 1999 record was an aberration, caused by unique climatic conditions and some well-publicized unlawful industrial emission releases for which the chemical plants in question face substantial fines. Indeed, from 1995 to 1997 the number of days during which Houston violated the ozone stan-

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dard fell 18 percent. The number of violations by Houston has leveled off since 1997, while Los Angeles has continued to reduce its ozone violations. However, Los Angeles still has poorer air quality than Houston when violations of carbon monoxide and particulate matter standards also are taken into consideration.

Improving Texas' Air Quality. The Bush administration pioneered a voluntary plan that has reduced air pollution from industrial plants and utilities in Texas. Now, with the installation of combustion controls and scrubbers and the use of primarily low sulfur coal—much of which resulted from the Bush plan, Texas ranks 17th among states in sulfur dioxide emission rates per unit of energy used and 14th in the emission rate for nitrogen oxides. As Figure II shows, from 1995 to 1997 in Texas:

- Nitrogen oxide emissions fell by 23.6 percent—second best of all of the states—compared to an average increase of 8.2 percent nationwide.
- Emissions of volatile organic compounds fell by 43.2 percent—fourth best among the states—compared to an average reduction of 16 percent nationwide.
- Sulfur dioxide emissions fell 17.1 percent—fifth best among the states—compared to an average increase of 11.2 percent nationwide.
- Carbon dioxide emissions fell 12 percent—13th best among the states—compared to an average reduction of 5 percent nationwide.

Of all air pollutants monitored by the EPA, only in particulate matter (PM) did Texas fail to surpass the nationwide reductions average from 1995 to 1997. The reduction in Texas was 11.9 percent, compared to an average reduction of 21.2 percent nationwide. Texas has only one geographic area out of attainment for PM—El Paso. Unfortunately, much of El Paso's air pollution is beyond the control of U.S. regulators. El Paso shares a

mountain basin airshed with Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission has shown that El Paso would meet the EPA's clean air standards were it not for air pollution from Mexican sources.

In an attempt to further improve Texas's air, in 1999 Gov. Bush signed legislation making Texas the first state to require that older power plants reduce emissions. These plants had been exempted from emission restrictions under the 1970 Clean Air Act.

Beyond Clean Air: Other Environmental Initiatives. Last year Bush signed two major environmental bills.

■ Legislation deregulating the state's electric industry requires the second highest use of "clean" energy (i.e., renewable energy and natural gas) in the country.

■ Another bill created the first-ever environmental education program in Texas, and established the Texas Environmental Education Project Fund, a public-private partnership that raises money to carry out environmental education projects.

In addition, with Texas's future water supply in doubt due to regular droughts and population growth, in his first term Gov. Bush signed a bill that for the first time established a comprehensive, statewide plan designed to balance the freshwater needs of wildlife, urban dwellers and rural water users.

Conclusion. Texas, like every state, has its share of environmental problems. In response, Gov. Bush has pioneered an approach that enlists the private sector as an ally, rather than an adversary, in the effort to solve environmental problems. The result has been that the environment has improved even as the population and the economy of Texas have grown at a high rate.

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