

AIR QUALITY BASICS: Air Pollution Complaints

When residents of the Houston area see or smell air pollution, they are sometimes unsure about how to report their concerns. Some people think that the pollution is an inevitable part of living in this region, and don't report it at all. Others may attempt to lodge a complaint directly with an offending company or facility.

The Galveston-Houston Association of Smog Prevention recently examined this issue in its report, "Whiners Matter! Citizen complaints lead to improved regional air quality control." It examines the role of citizen complaints in Harris County's pollution control efforts.

According to the report, residents should report their pollution concerns directly to local air quality agencies to ensure that potential violations are properly investigated and addressed. This can also help the agencies form a clearer picture of the region's most significant air pollution problems.

In Harris County, two local agencies share the task of responding to air pollution reports. Inside Houston city limits, the job falls to the City of Houston Bureau of Air Quality Control (BAQC). Outside the city, the task belongs to Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services (HCPHES).

Both agencies have good complaint systems in place for residents. However, the report suggests that both agencies need to create greater public awareness of their programs. It also concludes that the two systems could benefit from increased interagency coordination, including data sharing and analysis. To create a more effective regional complaint system, GHASP recommends that local air quality agencies:

- Treat every complaint as a valuable source of information, and use complaint data to identify trends and develop a more cohesive, regional strategy for addressing air pollution;
- Leverage complementary skills and resources when responding to complaints, so that regardless of jurisdiction, the appropriate expertise and equipment are dispatched for complaint response;
- Standardize complaint procedures and terminology to the extent necessary to facilitate data sharing and coordination among the agencies, while drawing on the unique strengths of each agency's system;
- Educate citizens on effective complaints, improve call intake procedures, and inform citizens of outcomes; and
- Recruit and train a network of supplemental investigators, in the community and law enforcement agencies, who can assist with initial data collection in cases where agency staff is unable to get to a location quickly.

Unfortunately, the Houston region measures some of the nation's highest levels of air pollution, including ground-level ozone and air toxics. The largest source of these problems is our vast petrochemical industry, which often makes the issue seem overwhelming. However, citizen air pollution complaints can play a critical role in efforts to clean up our air.

Mothers for Clean Air encourages residents who see or smell industrial air pollution to make careful observations and contact a local air quality agency immediately. Prompt and accurate reporting can be essential for investigations.

To report an air pollution problem in the Houston city limits, call the city's help line at 311. To report an air pollution problem in Harris County and outside of the Houston city limits, call HCPHES at (713) 920-2831.

Tips for Reporting Industrial Air Pollution

It can be difficult to know for certain when a facility is violating an air pollution law or regulation. In general, though, let your senses guide you if something seems amiss. If you see large clouds of gray or black smoke, or if you smell a strong odor, make a report. Here's a look at the types of information an investigator may need.



Visual Evidence

If you report smoke or a flare, you will need to describe the appearance and duration of the event. A flare that emits smoke for more than five minutes, or that burns brightly for an extended time, may indicate a violation.



Odor Evidence

If you experience an odor, the investigator may ask you to describe how intense it is, how long it has lasted, and what it smells like (rotten eggs, skunk). If you limited your outdoor activities because of the odor, make sure to include that in your report.



Physical Effects

If anyone in your household has experienced breathing difficulties or eye irritation as a result of the incident, or has needed to visit a doctor or take medication, give the investigator the details.