

THE CITIZENS OF EL PASO SPEAK ON
AIR QUALITY

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Report to
Texas House Committee on Environmental Regulation

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July 11, 2002

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The Center For Responsible Environmental Strategies (CRES)

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Responsible Environmental Strategies (CRES) was asked by the Texas House Committee on Environmental Regulation to assist it in fulfilling its interim charge: "Identify and prioritize environmental issues on the Texas-Mexico border, including air quality and solid waste."

With funding from the United States Department of Energy, National Border Technology Partnership Program and the United States Environmental Protection Agency, Regional Geographical Initiative/U.S. Mexico Border Program, CRES commissioned Orchard Communications, Inc., an Austin-based research firm, to conduct a qualitative study of citizens and stakeholders in the El Paso area regarding their opinions about air quality. El Paso was chosen because it is the fourth largest city in Texas, and borders Juarez, the fourth largest city in all of Mexico. Its air quality problems reflect the unique concerns facing many Texas/Mexico border communities. It has also been designated as a non-attainment area.

Researchers interviewed a total of 82 individuals, including individual stakeholders and/or community activists from government, academia, business, non-governmental non-profits, as well as randomly chosen voters in the El Paso area. Voters were recruited proportionately by political party; percentages were determined by the voting pattern in El Paso during the last presidential election. The opinions and knowledge of these individuals were sought about air quality issues and potential solutions.

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the perspectives of the citizens of El Paso, *qualitative research* was chosen as the method for gathering data. Qualitative data may be gathered in one of three ways:

- ◆ Observation
- ◆ One-on-one in-depth interviews
- ◆ Focus groups

While *quantitative* research seeks to understand “How many,” and offers statistical information, *qualitative* research seeks to understand “what, why and how.” Qualitative research often offers insight into what needs to be quantified at a later time. Valid quantitative findings yield definitive statistical information. Qualitative findings from interviews and focus groups are transcribed, categorically coded, and analyzed for content, themes, experiences, and opinions.

Readers are cautioned to remember the limits of qualitative research. The number of respondents is a small representative sampling of eligible populations, chosen from a limited universe. Hence, findings should be considered directional and not statistically definitive.

RESPONDENTS

Respondents are of three types: knowledgeable stakeholders, community activists and citizens with no special knowledge. [Stakeholders and activists who gave permission for their names to be released are listed in Appendix A. Citizens recruited at random to participate in focus groups are not listed; names may be made available by special request, as special permission would need to be obtained to release those names.] The following offers a breakdown of interviews:

- ◆ **Interviews with key “Knowledgeable” Stakeholders (20)**
“Knowledgeable” stakeholders are defined as those whose career or work intersects regularly with the clean air issue.
- ◆ **Two Focus Groups with Community Activists (12)** Some activists who responded to focus group recruitment efforts are considered “knowledgeable” stakeholders, while others have career or volunteer activities that dovetail into the clean air issue.
- ◆ **Four Focus Groups with El Paso Voters (50).** Two focus groups each were conducted in English and in Spanish, one in each language with parents of school children and one in each language with people aged 55-70. The vast majority of these citizen respondents were longtime or lifelong residents of El Paso.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

One of the most notable findings is an inconsistency between what knowledgeable stakeholders know, and the average citizen with no special knowledge, perceives. When reading these findings, it will be important to keep that distinction in mind.

Challenges

Air quality in the El Paso/Juarez air shed has improved, but "there is still a ways to go." Knowledgeable stakeholders thus far agree that air quality has improved, but that "there is still a ways to go." Attainment status of EPA standards is tenuous at best. Citizens without special knowledge of the issue, however, generally believe that El Paso's air quality deserves the "F" rating recently given to it by the American Lung Association based on the personal experiences their family has with upper respiratory disease, including high reported incidences of asthma and allergies.

"When Juarez sneezes, we catch a cold." No other large Mexican city borders a large city in the United States in the same way as Juarez borders El Paso. While El Paso and Juarez are separated by the Rio Grande, sixteen miles separate San Diego and Tijuana, the other densely populated border cities often compared to El Paso and Juarez. While the population of El Paso is 700,000, the population of Juarez, which is Mexico's fourth largest city, tops 1.1 million people. United States census may show the area to contain 700,000 people, but the reality is that the area has a population of close to 2 million people. The close proximity of the two cities means that Juarez's problems become El Paso's problems. El Pasoans interviewed strongly agree with one respondent, who said, *"Only a bridge divides us."*

Compromised air quality has complex and interwoven causes and effects. Air quality in the El Paso/Juarez air shed is a complex issue. Unique to El Paso is its topography, climate and close proximity to Mexico. Thermal inversions related to El Paso's topography, its desert location, meteorological conditions, and acts of God such as dry weather and high wind, contribute to the status of air quality on any given day. Likewise, the sources are multifaceted, including particulate matter (dust) carried by wind, emissions by mobile sources (such as cars and trucks), or other sources of pollution from maquiladoras, brick kilns in Mexico and other industrial sources on the Texas side of the border.

According to respondents, the primary problems caused by, or issues affected by, poor air quality may be categorized into the following:

◆ Public Education

Community activists and stakeholders agree that the public lacks focus about specific causes and effects of poor air quality. Public information and education is needed to provide facts and to raise awareness about what individuals can do. Citizens agreed that with more information, they would be more inclined to take personal actions that could help improve air quality.

El Paso citizen respondents showed little awareness of what has been done by their government to improve the air quality problem. Only one of the 50 citizen respondents had ever heard of the TNRCC, and few believed that the EPA had done enough to fix their problems. Some older Spanish-dominant El Pasoans expressed the opinion that the U.S. governmental entities are as corrupt as the Mexican governmental entities, with officials subject to bribery by large corporations. While they are aware of air pollution monitoring and the possible redesignation of El Paso as an "attainment" area, the majority of respondents tended to more strongly believe the latest report card of the American Lung Association, which gave El Paso's air quality an "F."

Few citizens had any awareness of the Paso del Norte Joint Advisory Committee on Air Quality; those who were aware were in the Spanish-dominant groups. A few of the community activists expressed "embarrassment" that they knew so little about initiatives to clean the air, and seemed to be much more cognizant of local health improvement initiatives, such as those against domestic violence, for children's health insurance, and about asthma. A resonant finding is the belief that citizens on both sides of the border will respond to calls for change if they believe their children's health will be favorably affected. They cited the increase in immunization rates in Mexico since 1996 as proof that when educated, people in Mexico are more willing to "do the right thing."

◆ Environmental Protection

"Mobile sources" such as automobiles and trucks are generally perceived to be the greatest contributor to poor air quality in the El Paso/Juarez air shed. Community stakeholders and citizens alike say the problems stem from the age of the automotive fleet and lack of maintenance of vehicles in the El Paso/Juarez area, as well as poor enforcement of vehicular registration and inspection laws in Texas and New Mexico, and unequal laws in Mexico.

Stakeholders working on air quality believe that monitoring is inadequate. At least one knowledgeable stakeholder stated his belief that inadequate monitoring caused a loss of grant funding for research to better pinpoint sources

of pollution, which could dovetail into a health effects study. Stakeholders and citizens alike perceive a need for additional monitoring equipment to understand the nature of the problem with greater accuracy.

Stakeholders are further frustrated when health effects of air pollution become known, and enforcement by state and federal agencies on business is perceived as weak.

While citizen respondents blame Mexico, they were more likely than knowledgeable stakeholders to believe they personally could do more to improve air quality. In particular, there was a strong call among citizens for better vehicle maintenance and inspection, and stricter enforcement on "cheaters." Whether true or not, there is widespread belief that corruption is prevalent among emissions inspectors. Some aggravation with neighbors who purchase cars in New Mexico or Mexico, where there are lower emissions standards, was expressed, though not many respondents were predisposed to call to report those offenders. Respondents also noted (with some irony) that when El Pasoans sell old autos and buses to Juarez citizens or city government, they are continuing to contribute to air quality problems.

◆ Transportation

The mobile sources have a greater opportunity to "spew black smoke" because of the perceived lack of a mass transit option, a need for improved traffic controls, or additional highways. El Paso respondents from all groups generally do not believe they have received enough state highway dollars to mitigate their traffic problems. Other problems cited include the lack of paved roads in some surrounding areas. Desert conditions keep the unpaved roads from becoming packed, leading to dust pollution on the many windy days in El Paso. In general, they hold El Paso County government responsible for this.

◆ Economic Impact

There is a strong awareness among all respondents of the interrelated nature of economic opportunity and economic development with air quality concerns.

Most respondents acknowledge that poverty found on the Mexican side of the border is the biggest barrier to solving air quality problems. Most respondents expressed sincere sympathy for a Mexican family who may have to choose between burning what they can find for heat versus cleaning the environment, or the cost of maintaining or getting rid of an old car versus the need for transportation to go to and from work. Many express a desire for state

and federal government to do more to help Mexico, and say that El Paso's problems cannot be solved without the United States helping Juarez.

Most citizen respondents expressed the idea that in the past, many El Pasoans blamed industries such as ASARCO for their air quality problems. The shutdown of ASARCO, however, did not improve air quality as it was intended to, leaving some respondents reluctant to blame industry, saying that the resulting loss of jobs presents a serious dilemma. They also perceive the strict regulations brought about by the quest for attainment as a possible deterrent to businesses relocating to El Paso.

◆ Health

Despite reported improvements, the majority of citizen respondents, most of them longtime residents of El Paso, believe that air quality has worsened, an idea strengthened by an overall denigration of health, a phenomena they attribute largely to poor air quality. For example, in both groups of parents, *over half* said they had children in their household with asthma. One man whose father worked as a border guard died of heart disease, a fact he attributes to inhalation of diesel emissions for an extended period of time.

Stakeholders from the medical profession (and others) acknowledge that a variety of health problems have intensified hypothetically as a result of poor air quality, however, there has been no real comprehensive study on the health effects of air pollution. While funding has been received recently to study the effects of lead, there was a very strong call from most knowledgeable stakeholders for the funding to do a comprehensive health effects study, specifically to cross-match the presence of pollutants with health ailments.

◆ International Bridges

Time spent waiting at border crossings has lengthened as a result of security concerns since the terrorist attacks on September 11. However, knowledgeable stakeholders generally agree that the problem on the bridges preceded 9/11 with the 400-500% increase in truck traffic since passage of NAFTA. September 11 has only exacerbated an existing problem. The tragic death of children from carbon monoxide poisoning while their parents' car idled at a border crossing bridge was cited in all interviews and focus groups as the absolute worst case of lengthened time to cross the border.

One El Paso State Representative said, "*NAFTA was supposed to make us the doorway. Instead, we have become the door mat.*" Inadequate local infrastructure to handle increased traffic from border crossings, and the lack of options for

diverting large truck traffic, are of deep concern to many of the respondents interviewed and a reason frequently cited for increased funding for the El Paso area. The many layers of government operating the border area are best exhibited by the many inspections required, including drug enforcement, INS, Customs, and the Texas Department of Public Safety. Senator Elliot Shapleigh has asserted an agenda for a "one-stop" inspection station, and the addition of high-tech equipment to x-ray trucks; however, some governmental stakeholders acknowledge that the likelihood of that happening is mitigated by the continuing and often competing interests of the agencies involved.

"Sometimes they burn the village to save it." The competition among governmental agencies is believed to exacerbate the problem or worsen air quality. For example, Drug Enforcement Agency, or Immigration and Naturalization Services checks on vehicles at an international bridge may prevent drugs or illegal aliens from entering Texas, but the idling cars at the bridge worsen air quality.

◆ Unequal Protection and Enforcement in Mexico

The failure to enforce environmental protection standards on the maquiladoras and brick kilns on the Mexican side is widely acknowledged as a serious barrier to improvement. Unequal enforcement of vehicle emissions testing was also frequently mentioned. A few respondents in both activist and citizen groups blamed local industry, but to a greater extent, they blame American-owned multinational companies operating in Mexico that do not comply with U.S. environmental standards.

◆ Border Affairs

El Paso respondents expressed the strong opinion that public education is also needed for decision-makers in Austin and Washington about El Paso's unique problems. They challenged lawmakers in Texas from outside their district to come to El Paso to "walk in their shoes," and observe the problems along the border for themselves. Most respondents generally expressed a strong sense that state government ignores them.

Because of the complexity of the air quality problem and the necessity of bi-national/tri-state solutions, the issues highlighted above should be considered comprehensively as unique border issues.

Proposed Solutions

The complex, interwoven nature of the problem makes a traditional approach of individual governmental agencies "marching to the beat of their own drum," inefficient and often ineffective. The need for greater collaboration and cooperation was widely proposed. Stakeholders strongly express the idea that solutions need to acknowledge the complexity of the issue and the border, and be multifaceted and inclusive of interdisciplinary approaches. Knowledgeable stakeholders praised recent innovations such as the emissions trading program implemented by TNRCC as realistic and helpful.

Collect "real-time" chronic disease data and match it with "real-time" environmental data to gain a clearer picture of what has caused perceived increases in chronic disease. In addition, El Pasoans say that more air quality monitoring is needed, particularly on the international bridges. The impact of air and water quality on the health of the community is perceived, but not really proven. The lack of funds for research and instrumentation frustrates community stakeholders trying to solve problems. As one knowledgeable stakeholder said, *"We are poor. There is not a great deal of access to health care. The best we can do for our community of people is try to protect them from health problems by cleaning up our environment. We need to track disease so we can prevent it."*

When considering funding, consider the border's unique situation. Decision makers and problem solvers outside of El Paso reportedly often fail to consider the unique needs of a border community. For example, a few knowledgeable stakeholders expressed amazement at the naiveté of a recent memo on anti-terrorism, that said [to paraphrase], "if you are a border community, consider the following added contingencies." Additional funding for those "added contingencies", however, was not offered. Respondents say that the fact of being a border community adds circumstances that, simply put, cost more money. Traditional funding formulas based on United States census data don't take into account the 1.1 million people living across the bridge, who work, visit family, shop and use other parts of the community's infrastructure daily.

"We have a lot of dollars and they have few pesos." While the State of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juarez are generally not perceived by stakeholders or citizens to have provided enforcement or economic support for air quality improvements as thoroughly or quickly as El Pasoans wish, it is generally understood that it is because they have limited financial resources and higher priorities (for example, battling infant mortality than air quality). The majority of those interviewed express the strong opinion that the City of El Paso, the State of Texas and the United States should help Juarez with problems contributing to

poor air quality such as unpaved roads, the need for heaters to prevent tire burning, etc.

Where there is progress, there is a non-governmental, non-profit group. Stakeholders generally agree that progress has been made in large part because of bi-national, tri-state collaborative efforts to monitor and remediate air quality. In particular, the work of the Paso del Norte Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) and Clean Cities Coalition is ongoing and favorably viewed by participants and observers of these efforts. Knowledgeable stakeholders believe that state and federal support for these projects, which often function without paid support staff, should be considered. The public is generally not aware of these efforts, and showed widespread lack of familiarity with the committees. While respondents were aware of "ozone action days", focus group findings indicate that additional targeted public education about the efforts of JAC and others like them would receive widespread support. These groups typically seek economically viable solutions to improve environmental conditions that can be implemented without legislative activity.

Recommendations

El Paso citizens and stakeholders offer the following recommendations:

◆ Public Education

- Increase funding for TNRCC and non-governmental agencies to sponsor public education campaigns to raise awareness among El Pasoans about what they can do to enhance air quality in their hometown.
- Raise awareness among lawmakers and decision-makers about El Paso's unique circumstances and problems; encourage them to visit El Paso and talk to citizens and stakeholders themselves to better understand what is needed to solve this problem.

◆ Environmental Protection

- Add additional monitoring stations in the El Paso area.
- Fund research to refine the definitions of toxic emissions.
- Continue to explore "emissions currency trading," and encourage these types of innovative solutions in the private sector.
- Implement stricter local enforcement of emissions testing (add more commissioned inspectors who can ticket offenders).
- Enhance enforcement capability compliance for local vehicle owners who register vehicles in surrounding counties by funding a centralized state automated system.

- Assist Mexico in establishing a parallel emissions standard for diesel trucks, and implement a cooperative automated system to ensure that trucks entering Texas meet emissions standards. Turn back trucks that do not meet standards.
- ◆ **Transportation**
 - Improve traffic control (e.g. synchronize traffic lights).
 - Create more mass transportation options (cleaner buses and more bus routes).
 - Fund additional thoroughfares as needed to mitigate traffic.
 - Increase funding for the Texas Department of Transportation to increase staff for transportation professionals to expedite the required modeling for a non-attainment area for transportation planning.
- ◆ **Health**
 - Fund a comprehensive study of health effects of various agents compromising air quality (particulate matter, nitrogen oxide, ozone, etc.)
- ◆ **International Bridges**
 - Expedite border traffic with more efficient one-stop inspection stations.
 - Create express lanes for frequent crossers.
- ◆ **Understand that Solving Juarez's Problems Helps El Paso**
 - Continue innovative programming, such as emissions trading, to assist solving Mexico's problems, such as that of brick kilns.
 - Encourage equal emissions standards for industry on both sides of the border.
 - Help pave roads in colonias and in Juarez to curb pollution from particulate matter (dust).
 - Assist Juarez to find proper means of providing heat to prevent the burning of tires and other garbage to provide warmth.
- ◆ **Border Affairs**
 - The Texas House of Representatives should establish a Border Affairs Committee to parallel that of the Texas Senate in order to compile information in a comprehensive fashion about all the many variables influencing environmental quality in El Paso and in all border areas.
 - Study funding formulas set up by state agencies based on census data to ensure that special consideration is given to border areas. Even though El Paso has a population of 700,000, it is augmented by the interdependent nature of its sister city, which has a population of over

1.1 million, and is the fourth largest city in Mexico. The population of the total area is close to 2 million.

APPENDIX A STAKEHOLDER RESPONDENTS

- ◆ Elaine Barron, M.D., *Paso del Norte Coalition, El Paso*
- ◆ Carlon Bennett, *Executive Director, Paso del Norte Clean Cities Coalition, El Paso*
- ◆ Major Bob Burroughs, *Texas Department of Public Safety, Austin*
- ◆ Laura Chapman, *El Paso Lung Association*
- ◆ State Representative Norma Chavez
- ◆ Mona Ortega Chew, *Office of the Mayor of El Paso, also active in local Autism Society*
- ◆ Major Coy Clanton, *Texas Department of Public Safety, Austin*
- ◆ Archie Clouse, *Director, Region 6, Texas Natural Resource & Conservation Commission, El Paso*
- ◆ Irasema Coronado, PhD, *Professor of Political Science, UTEP*
- ◆ State Senator Robert Duncan
- ◆ Hector Esparza, *AARP Coordinator*
- ◆ Dr. Bob Gray, *Center for Environmental Research & Policy, University of Texas at El Paso*
- ◆ Robert Grijalvo, *Aide to State Representative Paul Moreno, El Paso*
- ◆ Eric Groton, *Bracewell & Patterson, attorney representing El Paso Electric Company, Jobe Concrete, and Asarco, Inc.*
- ◆ Eduardo Hagert, *Legislative Aide for Senator Elliot Shapleigh*
- ◆ State Representative Pat Haggerty
- ◆ Dr. John Haynes, *Director of Environmental & Occupational Research, Texas Tech Health Sciences Center, and Chair of Paso del Norte Environmental Health Coalition*
- ◆ Bob Johnson, *Retired, Member of Audubon Society*
- ◆ Phillip LoPiccolo, *Legislative Director, Congressman Sylvester Reyes, Washington, D.C.*
- ◆ Wanda Olszewske, *Texas Parks & Wildlife, El Paso*
- ◆ Anna Perez, *Hispanic Leadership Institute, El Paso*
- ◆ State Representative Joe Pickett
- ◆ Kenna Ramirez, *Texas Commission for the Arts*
- ◆ Judy Ramsey, *Planning Administrator, Texas Department of Transportation, El Paso*
- ◆ Jesus Reynosa, *Program Manager for Air Quality, City/County of El Paso Health & Environmental District*
- ◆ Meloyda Salaires, *El Paso County*
- ◆ David Schanbacher, *Air Program Coordinator, Texas Natural Resource and Conservation Commission, Austin*

- ◆ Shari Schwartz, *Development Director, UTEP; also President of Coronado High School PTA, and member of Junior League, El Paso*
- ◆ Lowell Stokes, *Attorney, El Paso*
- ◆ Captain Gary Sullivan, *Texas Department of Public Safety, Austin*
- ◆ Jerry Wolfe, *Office of Environmental Policy and Assessment, Texas Natural Resource and Conservation Commission, Austin*
- ◆ Juan Zevallos, *Center for Border Health Research, Texas Tech Health Sciences Center, El Paso*