

## Comal County meets national air quality standards, Bexar County doesn't County's air meets standards

### Bexar County now in nonattainment

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The Herald-Zeitung

The Environmental Protection Agency recently released long-awaited air quality designations for the counties in the San Antonio metropolitan area, deeming Bexar County as nonattainment, or not in compliance, and the surrounding seven counties, including Comal, as in attainment.

While Comal County skirted any restrictions, Bexar County's marginal nonattainment status triggers some additional requirements.

The marginal status means the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality must develop a State Implemented Plan (SIP) for the county, which will outline measures taken to reduce pollution locally.

The designations were released July 17. They will take effect 60 days after the notice is published in the Federal Register.

"We have three years to come into attainment," said Diane Rath, executive director of the Alamo Area Council of Governments. "The public and private entities have been very focused. Over the past 15 years, we have decreased our ozone levels over 20 percent."

Modeling projections predict Bexar County will be out of attainment status by 2020, according to Rath, an expectation echoed by the EPA.

The San Antonio region had been awaiting its air quality designation after standards revisions in 2015 changed the acceptable ozone level. Previously, counties could not exceed ozone levels of 0.075 parts per million. Now, counties cannot exceed 0.070 ppm.

In 2016, when the new standards took effect, the San Antonio area's National Ambient Air Quality Standards reached about 0.073 ppm.

Though Bexar County was classified as nonattainment, the county would have complied with the old standards.

"If you look at the actual numbers over the past 10, 15 years, it's improved measurably in the Bexar County, San Antonio region, yet the standard ... keeps being raised," said Michael Meek, president of the Greater New Braunfels Chamber of Commerce.

Estimates from a St. Mary's University economist partnering with the Alamo Area Council of Governments predicted costs to San Antonio of being designated nonattainment ranged from \$79 million to \$709 million.

This gap is so vast because a status of nonattainment could sway companies from expanding or relocating to the region.

"Would that change a decision they (companies) otherwise would have made, even though Comal County is currently in attainment?" Mayor Pro Tem Wayne Peters said. "You never know. Hopefully it won't have any negative effects."

Although Comal County was designated in attainment, New Braunfels should continue looking for ways to minimize emissions of both new and existing companies, said Peters, who also sits on the Alamo Area Council of Governments Air Improvement Resources Committee.

Comal County residents will most likely notice the effects of Bexar County's designation through gasoline prices, which may be higher in San Antonio because of newly required pollution-reducing equipment.

The planning process for traffic projects in Comal, Guadalupe and Bexar counties could also involve more environmental review, Rath said.

"The planning process would be much more burdensome and slower," Rath said. Counties designated as either attainment or unclassified include Atacosa, Bandera, Comal, Guadalupe, Kendall, Medina and Wilson.

The notice issued by the EPA indicated national ozone concentrations dropped by 13 percent from 2007 to 2016.