

Houston says benzene levels rising

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Chemical industry officials deny a claim by public officials that levels of benzene have increased in the Houston region, a published report said Sunday.

The Houston Chronicle reported that data collected by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality showed 13 air monitors detected concentrations of benzene -- a carcinogen -- exceeding healthy levels.

The chemical industry, using different data that included measurements from 2004 to 2006, disputed the claim.

Russ Roberts, a spokesman for the East Harris County Manufacturer's Association, said data released by the Environmental Protection Agency showed a 12 percent decline in Harris County benzene emissions from 2004 to 2006.

"(Houston Mayor Bill White) has promised to applaud industry for benzene reductions," Roberts said. "If those aren't numbers that can be applauded, then I'm not sure what we can do for the city of Houston."

The EPA report is based on self-reported data from the companies. Environmental activists questioned the results.

"These are industry-reported estimates of emissions," said Matthew Tejada, executive director of the Galveston-Houston Alliance for Smog Protection. "If the numbers do not line up with monitor results, then something is wrong."

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