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Climate Connections: Causes

## In Texas, Climate Creeping onto Agenda

by John Burnett

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*Morning Edition*, November 26, 2007 · Texas emits more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than any other state. And if Texas were a country, it would be the seventh-largest carbon dioxide polluter in the world.

Texas's high carbon dioxide output and large energy consumption is primarily a result of large coal-burning power plants and gas-guzzling vehicles, both of which contribute to the pollution problem. But while many Texans think bigger is better, there are signs of an attitude change on energy consumption.

### The National Car of Texas

Climate activists say that giant 14-mile-per-gallon Chevy Suburbans — once marketed as the National Car of Texas — are part of the problem.

Texas is the nation's largest energy hog because it has a lot of industry, a lot of people, a lot of air conditioning, a lot of miles and a lot of big cars. Tangi Spencer, a movie caterer in Dallas, explains the big-car phenomenon in Texas quite simply: "Here, it's the bigger the truck, the better off you are; the bigger the gas guzzler you are, the better off you are."

But efforts are being made, even by religious leaders, to try to minimize consumption. In a sermon one Sunday by Rev. Raymond Bailey, pastor of Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, he suggested that his flock consider reducing so many trips in their cars. His message was not received too favorably by a few members of his church.

"They said to me, 'Now preacher, now don't mess with our cars, I'm not going to give up my car.' And that's just human nature," Bailey says. "We are willing to call for sacrifice on the part of others, but not on self. And this global warming is a very good example of that."

Students at Abilene Christian University in Texas are encountering the same type of reaction as they circulate a petition supporting a carbon-neutral campus.

"It's actually really hard, especially in Texas, to kind of make this issue real," says Beth McIlhane, a 21-year-old education major. "They slough it off, just laughing it off, [saying] 'Oh, you hippie,' or something."

### Fighting Every Step of the Way

Currently, 35 states have climate action plans in place or under consideration. Many have launched strong initiatives to cut carbon dioxide emissions and even President and former Texas Gov. George W. Bush has acknowledged the human role in climate change.

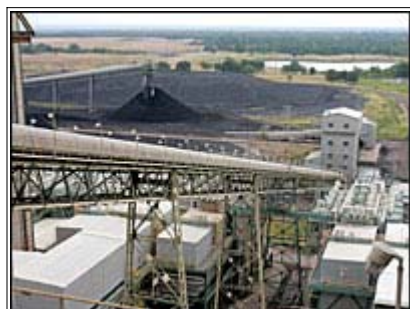
But in Texas, the state's Republican leaders are global warming skeptics. Gov. Rick Perry recently quipped that the largest source of carbon dioxide is Al Gore's mouth.

State Sen. Kirk Watson, a Democrat representing Austin, proposed a bill that would have merely set up a task force to study climate change. Though it passed the Senate, it died in the House.

When Watson's bill was brought before a committee, a who's who of carbon commandos signed up to oppose it, including the Texas Oil and Gas Association, the Gulf Coast Lignite Coalition, the Texas Chemical Council and the Texas Automobile Dealers Association.

"So the environment up there was a real negative environment toward making any progress or really even being able to talk openly," Watson says.

Andrew Dessler, a climatologist at Texas A&M University who testified at the same hearing, was astonished at the boldness of the carbon lobbyists who were opposed to taking action.



David J. Phillip

Coal is transported on a conveyor into TXU's Big Brown power plant near Fairfield, Texas. The electric station is one of TXU's new lignite-fueled power plants. Getty Images



Joel Sartore

Large personal vehicles and heavy traffic are contributing factors to the large volume of carbon dioxide produced by Texas. National Geographic/Getty Images

"So they're going to fight you every step along the road, tooth and nail," Dessler says. "They don't even want to talk about it, which seems just

crazy."

But Bill Peacock, who testified against climate change bills for the influential conservative think tank, Texas Public Policy Foundation, says not having a government-mandated plan puts Texas in front of the rest of the world.

"Companies here are free to respond to the marketplace," Peacock says. "So, yes, I'm very pleased the Texas legislature decided to take more time on this issue without passing anything."

### **Signs of Change**

There are signs that that things are changing in Texas. Earlier this year, the state's largest utility, TXU, dropped plans to build eight coal-fired plants, in part, because of a popular uprising over their impact on air quality and the atmosphere.

And in the absence of leadership from governments in Austin or Washington, D.C., to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, Texas mayors are stepping forward to challenge the state's hydrocarbon addiction.

"Texas has had its head in the hot burning sands for quite some time," says Tom Smith, head of the Austin office of consumer group Public Citizen. "But now it's getting a little too hot and we're starting to look around to see what we can do about it."