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Environment Department Opposes Permit for Asarco Copper Smelter in El Paso because of Air Quality Issues for New Mexico

(Santa Fe, NM) – The New Mexico Environment Department opposes the renewal of the air permit that would allow the reopening of the Asarco Inc. copper smelter in El Paso. Texas released a report this week saying the permit could be renewed for five years if certain conditions are met.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) issued a report on May 1 stating the facility's New Source Review air quality permit would be renewed if Asarco made repairs and replacements of outdated equipment and met other conditions. The Asarco plant is less than a mile from New Mexico's border.

"Air quality and pollution issues stemming from the plant are not just a problem for El Paso and Texas but for New Mexico as well," said New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry. "This is an air shed issue. What Asarco does affects the air shed that includes the region around El Paso including Doña Ana County. Sunland Park has been polluted for too long and this must stop."

The plant shut down in 1999 after the price of copper fell in the 1990s. Air emissions from the smelter during the plant's operation created arsenic and lead soil contamination around the El Paso facility. That contamination posed public health concerns in Sunland Park and other New Mexico communities. Those communities today face other air quality concerns, including elevated levels of airborne particulate matter and ground level ozone pollution.

The department's Air Quality Bureau first opposed the renewal of the permit in January 2005. The department wrote a letter to TCEQ asking it to review how air emissions from the smelter would affect New Mexico's residents and the environment. The Paso del Norte Air Shed includes the government of Doña Ana County, the State of New Mexico, El Paso, TCEQ, Ciudad Juarez and the State of Chihuahua, Mexico.

The department will review the recent TCEQ report and make comments regarding the potential impacts to public health and the environment in Doña Ana County.

"Just because the permit ensures Texas' emissions standards are met, it does not mean New Mexico's concerns are addressed," said Jim Norton, Director of the Environmental Protection Division for NMED. "Governor Richardson has consistently expressed the importance of improving New Mexico's air quality and environment."

El Paso Mayor John Cook and four El Paso City Council members opposed the issuance of the permit earlier this week as well.

Asarco operates another copper smelter in Hayden, Ariz. Asarco, American Smelting and Refining Company, organized in 1899, according to the company's Web site. The company began as a consolidation of a number of lead-silver smelting companies but today produces copper and other metals.

Asarco's domestic mines produce about 350 to 400 million pounds of copper a year.

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