

TCEQ's mission is to protect Texans. Its own data shows it's failing

By Kathryn Guerra / Brion Oaks,



Clumps of algae are shown in 2024 in the South San Gabriel River, which neighbors suspected were caused by high levels of phosphorous from wastewater discharge from the city of Liberty Hill. A new report finds the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is slow to investigate some complaints and takes years to finalize penalties against polluters. (Ricardo B. Brazziell/Austin American-Statesman)

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, better known as TCEQ, likes to talk about its mission: “protecting public health and natural resources consistent with sustainable economic development.” But talk is cheap.

The state agency’s own performance data reveals a regulator that has abandoned half of its mission – the half that protects people.

A [new report from Public Citizen’s TCEQ Watchdog Campaign](#) tells the story, and it all points to decisions made by Gov. Greg Abbott’s political appointees at the top of the agency. In fiscal year 2025, TCEQ conducted the fewest on-site investigations in eight years – 3,600 fewer than 2024, 5,200 fewer than 2023, and fewer than it did during the COVID pandemic years.

Meanwhile, the agency received 9,200 environmental complaints from Texans last year, but it took TCEQ at least 30 days to respond to more than half of them. Nearly a third were referred elsewhere or never investigated.

Think about what that means. A family smells chemical odors in their neighborhood. A rancher finds dead fish in a creek downstream from industrial discharge. A parent sees a layer of dust on a playground near a concrete plant. Thousands of times per year, TCEQ's response is silence.

On enforcement, the picture is no less grim. TCEQ entered 2025 with a backlog of 1,432 enforcement cases. It resolved 39. At that pace, the backlog would take 35 years to clear.

TCEQ leaders acknowledge this is the result of batching together different complaints against the same company so they're all resolved at once — a process that can delay the outcome by years. In one striking example, commissioners approved an order covering a decade of violations of state and federal air quality permits at a Brazoria County chemical plant — and gave the polluter a \$450,000 discount on its \$2.2 million in fines.

Indeed, out of roughly 450,000 regulated companies in Texas, fewer than a third of one percent — 1,200 total — saw any environmental enforcement action last year. If you're a polluter in Texas, math is on your side.

And when communities push back through the permitting process, they hit another wall. Contested case hearings — one of the few tools Texans have to challenge a permit before an independent judge — were denied by TCEQ 40% of the time in 2025, despite the fact these hearings were recommended by the agency's own Office of Public Interest Counsel, the part of the agency that's designed to represent the interests of regular Texans.

Meanwhile, Texas lawmakers have cut the agency's funding by 33% percent over the past five years, even as the number of regulated facilities has grown. And federal Environmental Protection Agency funding cuts are expected to shift even more regulatory responsibility to a TCEQ that's already coming up short.

But let's be honest: Even a fully-funded agency that ignores communities, delays and discounts penalties, and rubber-stamps polluter permits is just a more expensive version of the same problem. The real question is whether agency leaders even want TCEQ to do its job.

So we ask: How does the TCEQ protect public health without investigating harm? How does it deliver accountability without enforcement? How does it build public trust if everyday Texans aren't heard?

When those questions are put directly to leadership, the response is disheartening, to say the least. At a recent TCEQ commissioners public hearing, we shared these findings, only to be interrupted mid-sentence by TCEQ Chair Brooke Paup, who didn't seem eager to hear the agency's own data.

If TCEQ's leaders can't be bothered to sit through three minutes of uncomfortable truths from public advocates, it's impossible not to conclude that the agency views its regulatory role as a steadfast ally to corporate polluters.

But TCEQ's mission includes a promise to the people of Texas, and the data says the agency is breaking that promise. Who's paying the price? The families, workers and communities who are being ignored at best — and harmed at worst. They deserve far better from their government.

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