U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Inspector General

10-P-0154
June 23, 2010

At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

The public health risk from exposure to air toxics is a concern in many urban areas. Accordingly, we conducted this evaluation to assess how the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) tracks progress toward the goals of its 1999 Integrated Urban Air Toxics Strategy. The Clean Air Act (CAA) Amendments of 1990 required EPA to develop this Strategy to reduce public health risks from air toxics emissions in urban areas.

Background

Air toxics are emitted from a variety of sources, including major sources (refineries, power plants), small stationary sources (dry cleaners, gas stations), and mobile sources (cars, trucks, construction equipment). Excessive exposure to air toxics may result in increased risks of cancer and noncancer diseases affecting the human respiratory, reproductive, and neurological systems.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional, Public Affairs and Management at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2010/20100623-10-P-0154.pdf

Key Activities in EPA's Integrated Urban Air Toxics Strategy Remain Unimplemented

What We Found

EPA has not implemented key requirements of CAA Section 112(k), including developing emission standards for all area (smaller) source categories and submitting a second report to Congress (due in 2002) identifying urban areas that continue to experience significant public health risks from air toxics exposures. In addition, 10 years after issuing the 1999 Integrated Urban Air Toxics Strategy, EPA has still not implemented key activities outlined in the Strategy. For example, EPA has not established baseline risk data to measure progress in reducing air toxics risks. As a result, EPA has not tracked progress in meeting the Strategy's goals.

Further, although EPA determined in 2001 that a risk-based program is necessary to meet the goals of the Strategy, EPA has not yet determined whether it has the statutory authority to require State and local agencies to implement such a program. Many State and local agencies do not have their own risk-based programs, and about half of the States and several local agencies have laws preventing them from implementing environmental regulations stricter than EPA's regulations. Without the establishment of a minimum, federally required risk-based program, we do not believe that all State and local agencies will implement programs to adequately address the health risks from urban air toxics.

EPA's last risk assessment, based on 2002 data, estimated that 1 in every 28,000 people could develop cancer from air toxics exposure, and that 2 million Americans live in areas with lifetime cancer risks from air toxics in excess of 1 in 10,000. Given the length of time since the Integrated Urban Air Toxics Strategy was developed and the problems EPA has encountered in its implementation, EPA should reassess and update its approach to addressing urban air toxics.

What We Recommend

We recommend that EPA (1) submit the required second report to Congress, which should include a list of urban areas that continue to experience high or unacceptable levels of risk and EPA's plan to reduce risks in those areas, as well as the factors that have hindered implementation of the Strategy and EPA's plan to address those factors; and (2) determine how it will measure progress in meeting the goals of the Strategy. EPA partially agreed with our recommendations, but did not agree to include the full list of issues in its second report to Congress, or to inform Congress if it decides to measure progress against a baseline other than a 1990 or similar baseline. EPA said it would reassess its position when submitting its corrective action plan. We consider the recommendations open and unresolved.