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## Brazoria County opposes smog reduction plans

eight-county region that must comply with federal air quality standards by 2007, are formally protesting Texas regulators' plans to impose smog reduction measures like those for Houston.

Commissioners on Tuesday unanimously passed a resolution authorizing the Brazoria County district attorney to take "all appropriate legal actions" to ensure that the county receives a fair hearing before the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC).

The TNRCC, which has already given preliminary approval of proposed smog reduction plans for the Houston-Galveston area, is now considering testimony on the plans. A final version will be adopted in December and sent to federal officials for consideration.

County leaders want a voice in negotiations that will determine what environmental measures are

in Brazoria County, part of an of the Business Coalition Task Force for the Brazosport Chamber of Commerce, told the Houston Chronicle in Wednesday's editions.

> "We don't think what we do affects Houston. The air and water in our county is cleaner than it's been in 40 years."

> — Jesse Hibbetts chair of the Business Coalition Task Force for the Brazosport Chamber of Commerce

"We don't think what we do affects Houston." Hibbetts said. "The er than it's been in 40 years."

Brazoria County officials have been the most vocal in the Houston area in opposing the state's proposals to curb ground-level ozone. Government and business leaders say the sprawling county, much of it farms and ranches, shouldn't be under the same restrictions as more urban counties.

Commissioners' resolution contends no conclusive proof exists that Brazoria County contributes to ozone rates recorded in Harris County and that nitrogen oxide emissions attributed to vehicles in the county are overstated.

The resolution also states that industries lowered their point-source nitrogen oxide levels from 103 in

This month, the TNRCC will hold public hearings and solicit written comments on its plan to reduce emissions that contribute to groundlevel ozone, smog's main ingredient.

## Regulators investigate auto insurance fraud

DALLAS (AP) — State regulators are investigating one of Texas' top auto insurers for overcharging thousands of drivers who watched their premiums go up after they were involved in accidents.

The estimated overcharges by the Farmers Insurance Group could amount to several million dollars, according to the Texas Department of In-

The agency said Tuesday it will seek refunds for all affected Farmers In-

surance policyholders and consider fihes against the company. "This will surely involve restitution and could involve some sort of punitive action, including fines," said Jim Davis, of the Department of Insur-

ance, according to the The Dallas Morning News Wednesday. A spokesman for Farmers declined to estimate the total amount of overcharges. When asked how many Farmers policyholders were affected, Bob

Huxel told the newspaper, "We hope to have those numbers firmed up by The Texas Department of Insurance began looking at the allegations af-

ter they were reported by Farmers. The company — the second largest auto insurer in Texas with more than \$1 billion in premiums — acknowledged that a class-action lawsuit by a

group of policyholders was being prepared when executives approached state That lawsuit has been abandoned now that insurance regulators are look-

ing into the overcharges, The Morning News reported. The excessive charges involved drivers who were in accidents in which they were at fault. Farmers reportedly levied surcharges against these at-fault

policyholders for longer than state regulations allow. Also on Tuesday, Insurance Commissioner Jose Montemayor announced a new toll-free hotline for reporting possible insurance fraud.

Montemayor said the state loses at least \$2 billion a year to insurance

1996 to 77 in 1999.

## **News in Brief** Police search for bathtub slayer

ARLINGTON (AP) - Police have searched the North Texas home of a suspect charged in the bathtub murders of two teachers and two sexual assaults that have eluded investigators for years.

Officers late Tuesday were searching for evidence in the case after officers arrested Dale Devon Scheannette, a suspect in the 1996 slayings, hours earlier. The 27-year-old Arlington man was arrested at his home on a capital murder warrant for both killings.

Scheannette remained behind bars Wednesday with no bond set, Arlington jail supervisor Sgt. Tony Folkers said. The suspect is charged in the killings of Wendie Prescott and Christine Vu.

The two teachers were slain months apart in 1996 at the same apartment complex in southwest Arlington after being strangled and beaten.

Both women were found dead, naked and face down in a partially filled bathtub. Prescott was found murdered on Christmas Day in 1996, three months after Vu's murder in the same complex.

