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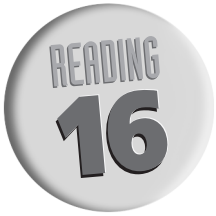

Mexico

GEOGRAPHY

No Fair Air to Spare

Mexico City is one of the most polluted urban areas in the world. An American journalist living in Mexico City looks at the problem in detail and describes what the government of Mexico is doing to combat it.

Shortly after dawn of the new year, Mexican officials proudly announced that, in 1999, Mexico City had experienced the cleanest air in a decade. Within days, the city was . . . . again shrouded [covered] in smog that clogged nasal passages, stung eyes and made throats raw. Schools in the southeastern part of the city were ordered to keep children indoors for a few days to reduce risks to their lungs.

Prompted mostly by skyrocketing levels of suspended particles—microscopic solids in the air—the government ordered some industries to cut production by half and used emergency laws to pull more old cars off the roads. Officials shut down more than 150 brickmaking factories known to sometimes illegally use old rubber tires as fuel. People crowded into emergency rooms with respiratory illnesses. . . .

It's true that more than a decade's worth of reforms have helped reduce some air pollution, said Adrian Fernandez, the director-general of information and measurement programs for Mexico's National Ecology Institute. "But I don't like to act too triumphant," he hastened to add. "There is so much more to do."

Mexico City and the Greater Valley of Mexico are ringed by mountains that trap pollution inside a bowl teeming [crowded] with 18.5 million people, 4.5 million vehicles, and tens of thousands of factories. Residents are exposed to a sickening stew of car exhaust, industrial emissions [factory smoke], dirt blown from vast tracts of unpaved land and wind-borne fecal matter dropped by legions [thousands] of street dogs. The region's bone-dry winter air makes pollution even worse. Relief usually comes only with spring rains. . . .

When air pollution here began approaching alarming levels in the late 1980s, Mexico established one of the world's most sophisticated pollution-monitoring systems and began to enact a series of reforms. [In 1999], measurements showed that action had indeed paid off. . . . Major contaminants such as carbon monoxide, lead and sulfur dioxide fell within normal levels with only a exceptions during 1999. The city had only five air contamination emergency days . . . compared with 37 in 1998. . . .

What helped Mexico City . . . was the phasing out of leaded gasoline in Mexico. It was eliminated in 1997. . . . All cars made in Mexico since 1991 have catalytic converters. Because many Mexicans can't afford new cars, however, only about 40 percent of vehicles are equipped with the pollution-reducing devices. Mexico's . . . "Today You Can't Drive" law pulls about 20 percent of the city's older cars off the streets every day. . . . The

bad news is that ozone is still an alarming health hazard, and it hovered well above healthy levels for several hours almost every day [in 1999]. . . .

The other contaminants still plaguing Mexico City's air at dangerously high levels are suspended particles, the product of vehicle and industrial fuel emissions, dog droppings and soil erosion. The particles lodge in the lungs and cause acute [sudden] or chronic [long-term] respiratory problems.

Reforestation projects have helped reduce suspended particles caused by soil erosion, but the city still needs to do more work to fill in bare patches of land. . . . Mexico City, with more than a million stray dogs roaming the city, [also] started a crackdown on pet waste, but disregard for the law is common.

. . . Ozone and suspended particles should decline as more industries and vehicles in Mexico City run on natural gas. Two large natural-gas underground distribution centers are under construction. . . . More enforcement of Mexico City's existing environmental laws is also a must. At least half a million of the 4.5 million vehicles in the city haven't undergone mandatory [required] smog-control testing. . . . Mexico recently gave regular police, rather than special environmental officers, the power to crack down on the law.

From "Mexico City's Pollution Getting Better, But Slowly," by Susan Ferriss in the *Austin American-Statesman,* March 17, 2000.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. How do technology and physical geography combine to create air quality problems for Mexico City?

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2. How have Mexico City's dogs contributed to its air pollution problem?

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3. What reforms have been put into place to deal with Mexico City's air pollution? What remains to be done?

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Activity

Find out how many air contamination emergency days were declared in Mexico City last year. Create a graph to show trends in the city's air contamination emergency days since 1997.