Study: Acadiana air quality lacking

Cancer causing agents highest in Iberia, Lafayette parishes

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LAFAYETTE — Acadiana ranks among the state's most "at-risk" areas for cancer-causing agents in outdoor air, according to a recent study by an environmental advocacy group.

In Acadiana, additional cancer and non-cancer risks from toxic chemicals in outdoor air are more than 100 times higher than the levels recommended by the Clean Air Act, according to a report released by the Environmental Defense Fund.

The Environmental Defense Fund ranks communities based on the magnitude of cancer and non-cancer causing health risks associated with estimated exposures to 148 hazardous air pollutants.

One goal of the 1970 Clean Air Act was to reduce lifetime cancer risks from those pollutants to one in one million people.

But according to the national study, Iberia Parish residents face a lifetime cancer risk of 480 cases in a million. The parish ranks fourth in the state among 64 parishes, trailing only St. Mary, Orleans and St. Bernard parishes.

Robert Braun, who heads USL's Chemistry Department, says the Environmental Defense Fund's figures should not be taken too seriously.

"I think in Lafayette and New Iberia we should be one of the low-risk areas in the state," said Braun, pointing to the parishes' lack of any major industry pollutants.

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Added Cancer Risk per million population

EPA goal: 1 in a million

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<th>State Rank</th>
<th>Parish</th>
<th>Additional risk per million</th>
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SOURCE: Environmental Defense Fund, April 1999 rankings of the 64 parishes

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Study

Braun says if some congressmen had their way, acceptable levels for air pollutants "would be zero." He also questions the accuracy of the modeling technique used in the study.

In 1984, Braun and his students sampled air at three locations in Lafayette Parish over a one-year period to measure acid rain levels. About the same time, a study, based on models but using no real data, was conducted by another group.

Upon completion, the modeling study suggested a much higher presence of acid rain in the parish than what the samples revealed.

Study shows area of highest risk

Nationally, 60 percent of the air cancer risk calculated by the Environmental Defense Fund comes from automobiles; 26 percent from small businesses, or "area" sources (such as chemicals from dry-cleaning, aerosol paints and petroleum-related products), and 14 percent from what's called "point" or industrial sources.

In New Iberia, however, bucked the national trend.

In Iberia, 78 percent of hazardous air pollutants come from area sources, with just 22 percent coming from automobiles.

In fact, Iberia Parish ranks 12th nationwide in pollutants derived from area sources -- and its residents face a one in 1,000 chance of suffering from cancer based on exposure to hazardous air pollutants.

It's also part of a four-parish leukemia cluster.

Since 1983, 39 children from New Iberia, Vermilion and St. Martin parishes have been diagnosed with leukemia.

"It's not something that you expect to find in a rural area like New Iberia," said New Iberia chemist Wilma Subra of the EDF findings.

Recently, the Environmental Epidemiology and Toxicology Section of the Office of Public Health launched a study into the four-parish cluster.

"It's a substantial risk and we definitely need to look into what's causing it... and what we can do to reduce those concentrations," said Subra, who has worked as a chemist for more than 30 years.

"The other thing that concerns me is that these area sources don't include pesticide applications, so I would suspect if that was included the cancer risk would be even higher," Subra said.

Cancer causing agents in the air, such as benzene and butadiene, have not been proven to cause leukemia. But their presence in the air can indicate a greater risk.

Solutions on the horizon

The Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality says that since 1990, much progress in combating air pollution from small and large businesses in the state has been made.

"We've done a lot to reduce air toxics," said Bob Hannah, administrator for the DEQ's Air Quality Division.

Hannah said improvements in the handling and transportation of petroleum products have made Louisiana's air much safer.

And, he said, many small businesses that deal with toxic chemicals are installing better controls to limit the amount of toxic fluids and gases that escape during the process. Others are opting to use less toxic chemicals.

Statistics support his contention.

Throughout the state, pollution from such sources decreased 41 percent between 1981 and 1997, from 121 million pounds of hazardous waste in 1991 to 74 million pounds in 1997.

Whether from automobiles, or small or large businesses, many improvements derive from more consistent monitoring, according to Hannah.

"We're getting more and more data on what's really happening (in industry)," he said.

"We've put monitoring systems out there, and they're showing us the same thing -- that the air quality is getting better."

As to solving Acadia's problems?

New Iberia's Subra said change must start at home.

"Local people need to look at the issue and see what the sources are and what can be done to control those sources," said Subra. "It's up to the local people to get involved.

"We can't look to the EPA to remedy this, we need to look to ourselves to remedy it in our own area," she said.

But how?

"Local government can be much more stringent, and they can also inquire as to which facilities are contributing to the pollution. Once you've identified the facility -- you can do something," she said.

(If you have questions or comments about this story, please contact Louis Rom at 339-6522, or via e-mail at lrom@theadvertiser.com)