Air toxics pose highest risk in La.

By BOB ANDERSON
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Air toxics pose the greatest risk of all environmental problems in Louisiana, according to a diverse panel that has gathered information on environmental threats over the past year.

Coastal wetland loss ranked second, followed in the highest category of risk by nonpoint source pollution, indoor air pollution, industrial wastewater discharges and lack of land use management, the panel of state and federal officials, doctors and representatives of industry and citizen groups concluded.

The ranking, which is subject to change after a series of public meetings, was done with a federal grant and is designed to be used as a guide to reallocate budgets to direct public funds toward the state's most important environmental problems, according to the Department of Environmental Quality, which was the lead agency in the program.

The provisional rankings, scheduled to be released later at a press conference, were released to the media Wednesday afternoon after a public information request by the Morning Advocate.

That request was initially refused by DEQ, which said the document was in draft form.

Of the 57 participants in the Leap to 2000 project, all signed the document except three of the chemical representatives and the two representatives of the Department of Natural Resources.

Among the signees were 22 representatives of 11 state agencies, 15 representatives of citizen groups, four federal officials and five industry representatives.

The Louisiana Chemical Association was not able to make a decision and needs more time to bring it before the membership, but will have an answer before the first town meeting in May, said Ed Flynn, LCA's representative on the panel.

There is support for the package by some companies and "some companies do have concerns," so it needs to be taken up at a board meeting.

Decisions also are expected by May 7 from two other chemical companies and discussions are continuing with the two DNR representatives, according to DEQ.

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The vision statement talks of minimizing toxic and cancer-causing emissions by the year 2000 and ozone levels that no longer exceed the healthful range. It envisions all of the state's surface waters meeting the water quality requirements for their designated uses.

The waste disposed of in Louisiana in the year 2000 is primarily from Louisiana sources, injection wells are no longer used and toxic chemicals are no longer disposed of in the land, according to the vision statement. "Fish and wildlife populations are healthy, abundant and in balance with the habitat," the vision statement for the year 2000 continues. "Habitats are being protected, restored and enhanced."

"The use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers" has been reduced by integrated pest management and "the state has an extensive monitoring program in place to assure food safety."

The vision statement also sees lower cancer rates, improved general health and a better quality of life due to improved environmental practices and education.

Other issues of high statewide risk, listed in order of their rankings are:

- Ozone, nitrogen oxides and carbon monoxide.
- Municipal wastewater.
- Pesticides.
- Accidental chemical releases.
- Oil and gas discharges.
- Abandoned hazardous waste sites.
- Groundwater contamination.
- Terrestrial habitat loss.
- Aesthetics provided by a healthy environment.
- Inland wetland loss.
- Worker exposure to toxic chemicals.
- Deep well injection of waste.
- Global warming.
- Solid waste sites.
- Ozone depletion.