BR air pollution hits near-record level

By BOB ANDERSON
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Baton Rouge air pollution reached the second highest level ever picked up on the city’s monitors Thursday, according to Mike McDaniel, head of the state’s air pollution control program.

State environmental officials are attempting to determine the reasons for the particularly high reading, he said.

The Pollution Standard Index, measured at the State Capitol, reached 207. Anything above 100 is considered unhealthful. The 207 reading is considered “very unhealthful” and a warning was issued advising elderly people and people with respiratory problem “to stay indoors and reduce physical activity” during the period of high pollution.

Even young people without respiratory problems can suffer from ozone pollution at that level, McDaniel said.

He said he watched the haze forming over the industrial complex Thursday morning and expected to see a violation of federal air standards when the monitoring
results came in. The highest level was reached between 11 a.m. and noon and the latest reading available at 2 p.m. indicated a level of 141.

McDaniel said this incident and the city’s continuing violation of federal air quality standards cause him great concern. The only higher reading ever recorded was in 1980.

It was the fourth time this year the city’s air has violated federal air pollution standards. The city remains on a federal non-compliance list because of the violations and will be required to take action to solve the problem or face penalties.

Several Baton Rouge health experts have reported increased respiratory complaints when the city’s ozone level is high.

Among the problems associated with ozone pollution are nasal congestion, sore throat, nausea, chest pain, coughing, wheezing, pulmonary congestion and labored breathing, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The extent of the problems depends greatly on the physical condition of a person. People with asthma and other lung problems are more likely to suffer ill effects. Children and elderly people are also at higher risk.

Ozone is formed when sunlight reacts with hydrocarbon emissions. State officials say 75 percent of the hydrocarbon emissions in the Baton Rouge area are from industrial activities and 25 percent come from auto exhaust. The Louisiana Chemical Association has questioned that ratio.

If a city exceeds federal air standards more than once in a year, it cannot get off the non-compliance list. Stiff penalties are levied on cities that do not take sufficient action to solve their air pollution problem.

Paul Templet, secretary of the Department of Environmental Quality, has said that getting Baton Rouge into compliance with federal air standards is one of his priorities.