Baton Rouge air unhealthful for fifth time this year

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Baton Rouge air pollution on Thursday broke the federal safety limit for the fifth time this year, and the probability for more dangerously high readings during the summer is good, a state official said.

DEQ issued a warning that “persons with respiratory ailments should reduce physical exertions and outdoor activity” when readings are in the unhealthful range, such as they were Thursday.

The monitors at LSU, the State Capitol and Carville picked up a reading of 131 on the Pollution Standards Index, said Mike McDaniel, head of the state’s air pollution control program. Anything above 100 is considered unhealthful.

Just one week ago, the city’s monitors picked up the second-highest air pollution levels ever recorded in Baton Rouge. A reading of 207, in the “very unhealthy” range, was recorded at the State Capitol and LSU.

Although Thursday’s reading was lower than the 207 measured last week, the reading taken at Carville means the poor air on Thursday covered a much wider area, McDaniel said. The readings were taken between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Although measurements of industrial activity were not available Thursday, McDaniel blamed Thursday’s high reading “on meteorology more than anything.”

The vast majority of Baton Rouge’s air pollution problems are caused by high levels of ozone, formed when sunlight reacts with hydrocarbon emissions from industry, automobiles and other small sources, such as laundries.

McDaniel said that a lack of wind, high temperatures and the abundance of sunshine during summer months in Baton Rouge contribute greatly to the ozone problem.

“As long as we’re experiencing this kind of weather, we’re going to have these problems,” he said. “The problem is not going to be a quick one to solve.”

Baton Rouge remains on a federal non-compliance list because of repeated violations of federal clean air standards and will be required to take action to solve the problem or face penalties.

McDaniel said the federal Environmental Protection Agency has handed Baton Rouge a mid-August deadline to file an outline of the first phase of a plan to combat ozone pollution.

Much of the state’s efforts now are centered on finding out what to do about the composition of hydrocarbons that are emitted to keep the pollution standards index below 100, he said.

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 against cities that do not take sufficient action to solve air pollution problems.

Health problems associated with ozone pollution include: nasal congestion, sore throat, nausea, chest pain, coughing, wheezing, pulmonary congestion and labored breathing, according to the EPA.

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