BR’s ozone pollution woes, some of worst in country

Baton Rouge air officially reached the unhealthful level seven times in 1984 from ozone pollution, according to state records.

Local doctors say those situations worsen complaints of asthma, sinus ailments and upper respiratory problems from their patients.

The American Lung Association suggests that those kinds of reactions occur in many patients before the air ever reaches the level that the federal government has set as unhealthy.

Baton Rouge has one of the worst ozone pollution problems of any city its size, according to data collected by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Of 72 cities of its approximate size, Baton Rouge was fourth highest in ozone pollution, the latest comparative EPA data indicate.

The city’s ozone pollution problem is linked directly to industrial emissions, say officials with both EPA and the state. The Louisiana Chemical Association disagrees, and sees automobile exhaust as a major source of ozone-causing hydrocarbons.

Gus Von Bodungen, who heads the state’s air pollution program, says that 75 percent of the ozone-causing hydrocarbons in Baton Rouge air come from industry, and 25 percent from cars.

Fred Loy of the Chemical Association feels that vehicles contribute more than 25 percent of the problem.

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No matter who is to blame, people suffer, local doctors say.

Dr. Douglas Davidson, a Baton Rouge physician, says he notices more respiratory complaints whenever the pollution index is high.

Many of his patients complain of the effects of ‘bad air,’ a complaint he did not hear in a previous practice in Mobile, Ala.

“We notice a definite relationship between high ozone levels and complaints of problems with sinus, runny eyes and related ailments, says Dr. Aaron Roy, an ear, nose and throat specialist.

“Without a doubt,” there is a correlation between high ozone levels and complaints of upper respiratory problems, says Dr. James Kidd III, a Baton Rouge allergist.

Ben Fontaine of the Louisiana Lung Association says there are an estimated 136,000 people in East Baton Rouge Parish to whom ozone pollution presents a special risk. They include adults suffering from asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis, as well as elderly people and children.

These people may be adversely affected by ozone levels that don’t reach the unhealthful level on EPA’s Pollution Standard Index, because that index was established as a compromise between industry and medical experts.

Even healthy people can be harmed by ozone pollution, Fontaine says.

Ozone has been shown to affect the immunological system in the lungs, lowering a person’s general resistance, he says.

Epidemiologists have found that people exposed to as little as 0.1 of a part per million of ozone had an increased frequency of chest discomfort, cough and eye irritation, according to a publication by the American Lung Association.

The standard for air being out of federal compliance and rated unhealthful is 0.12 ppm.

A study of one air pollution incident in Pennsylvania found that 88 percent of asthmatics experienced attacks during the incident, the Lung Association reports.

Studies of hospital records have also shown increased emergency room visits from asthmatics during times of high air pollution.

In a 1982 study of 72 cities of Baton Rouge’s size, the city ranked behind Bridgeport, Conn., New Haven, Conn. and Beaumont, Texas, as having the worst ozone pollution problems.

That is the latest comparative data available from EPA. Local air officials say Baton Rouge’s ozone problem has improved some, but the city still remains out of compliance with federal standards.

Von Bodungen says the state hopes to come into compliance by tightening “fugitive emissions” regulations on industry and requiring inspections of vehicle emission systems beginning this summer.

The fugitive emissions regulations went into effect at the end of 1984.