Cancer-cause views heard by legislators

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BATON ROUGE — Chemical industry spokesmen, an environmentalist and medical specialists offered a legislative panel wide-ranging views Wednesday on the possible causes of the reportedly high incidence of lung cancer in Louisiana.

The experts testified before a House-Senate panel on natural resources that is investigating possible causes of the high incidence of several forms of cancer in the state.

Dr. William J. McCarville, director of environmental affairs for the Monsanto Chemical Co., said the pattern of cancer incidence in rural as well as industrial areas indicates causes other than air pollution.

Dr. Joel Schwartz of the University of Illinois Medical Center countered that the national cancer rate increased as much between 1970 and 1977 as it did between 1935 and 1970, during an era of increased production of plastics and chemicals.

Dr. Pelayo Correa, an epidemiologist with the Louisiana State University Medical Center’s Tri-Parish Tumor Registry, said findings developed from a questionnaire show that in 30 percent of all cancer deaths in the state the victim was a cigarette smoker.

He estimated that if smoking were eliminated, it would stop 80 to 85 percent of lung cancers.

Ross Vincent, president of the Ecology Center of Louisiana, said a recent test “leaves little doubt that Louisiana communities are being contaminated by industrial emissions which are extremely dangerous.”

The committee is looking at possible legislation to be offered in the legislative session that begins April 19.

Vincent, referring to samplings of air in the Baton Rouge-Plaquemine-Geismar area, said one report on Plaquemine showed the town was “contaminated with organic chemicals which have been associated with cancer and birth defects.”

Schwartz, referring to the same sampling, said hydrocarbons found in the air in the three locations were in a high enough quantity to cause concern.

Sen. Thomas H. Hudson, D-Baton Rouge, author of the resolution that prompted the legislative hearings, said he is concerned by an apparent lack of control over vinyl chloride emissions.

Hudson said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has identified vinyl chloride as a possible cause of various forms of cancer. Of 13 Louisiana industrial plants emitting the chemical, nine lie between Baton Rouge and Geismar, Hudson said.

McCarville testified that national pollution levels fell 40 percent since adoption of the U.S. Clean Air Act. He questioned whether remaining levels are dangerous.

The Louisiana cancer pattern, he said, stretching from Northeast Louisiana to the New Orleans metropolitan area, fails to reveal a pattern traceable to air pollution.

“I can’t explain why,” McCarville said.

He said many factors couldn’t be ruled out, including lifestyle and wetland effect.

“We also can’t rule out other factors such as industry, the use of pesticides and herbicides in rural areas, can we?” asked Hudson.

McCarville replied, “It is never possible to prove the negative. To that extent you are right.”

Schwartz said the U.S. cancer death rate has increased 1 percent a year since 1970 and is higher for blacks.

The smoking rate has steadily decreased since 1945, he said, but the incidence of lung cancer has increased.

He said studies have shown that in chemical and petroleum refining areas, the incidence of cancer exceeds the norm by 5 to 10 percent, and in iron smelting areas by as much as 15 percent.

Vincent said he was concerned by an EPA report of emergency emissions of vinyl chloride in the Baton Rouge area. According to Vincent, the report said that because of the magnitude of such emissions “and because this region has the most vinyl chloride plants in the country, we believe it is extremely important that some sort of firm action be taken... to resolve and define this problem.”

“Please don’t wait for industry representatives and DNR (Department of Natural Resources) bureaucrats to admit there is a problem,” Vincent told the legislators.

Industry spokesmen, he said, cannot afford to admit they are polluting the air and be forced to spend millions to correct it, “and the DNR bureaucracy... is unlikely to admit there’s a problem as long as it is led by insensitive people who see themselves essentially as service agents for the facilities they regulate.”

Fred Loy, vice president of the Louisiana Chemical Association, said his group has commissioned a study of the contents of the Mississippi River.

“There is a mistaken notion in this country,” said Loy, “that cancer rates are on the upswing and that exposures to industrial and synthetic chemicals are largely responsible. The best scientific knowledge indicates that these notions are simply wrong.

“Non-smokers have extremely low rates of lung cancer, whether they live in polluted areas or not.”

He suggested the committee should back an appropriation to the Louisiana Cancer and Lung Trust Fund to finance a statewide tumor registry that would look into lifestyles and other related information on each cancer death reported.

He urged support for the state Office of Environmental Affairs, to staff the office with the best available professionals with appropriate salaries and delay legislative or regulatory action pending completion of a air quality survey in progress.