ABBEVILLE - An eight-year health study of residents around a former toxic waste site near the city's drinking water wells shows increased rates of various cancers in both men and women, state officials said.

A study around another hazardous waste site near the city showed lower-than-expected cancer levels, officials said.

Erica M. Caesar, epidemiologist with the state Office of Public Health, told parish officials Thursday a 1988-96 study of residents who lived near the PAB Oil and Chemical Services site 2.5 miles north of town revealed "statistically significant" numbers of cases of pancreatic cancer in men and ovarian cancer in women.

Caesar said the findings show the numbers of cancer cases in that particular census tract were significantly higher than in the rest of an area that includes most of Acadiana.

The comparison area, known as Region 4, includes Vermilion, Lafayette, Iberia, St. Martin, St. Mary, Acadia, St. Landry and Evangeline parishes.

Caesar stressed there is no direct scientific link between the former Superfund federal priority hazardous waste site and the incidents of cancer, but neither was one sought. She also said there is no scientific reason to believe the city's drinking water wells within a mile or so of the site were affected.

However, "groundwater beneath the site and monitoring wells off-site were found to contain elevated levels of heavy metals," which shows contamination migrated through underground water resources, the study said.

The water wells of residents near the site showed elevated levels of arsenic and other contamination not linked to the site, according to the study, which also stated some chemical exposure of residents may have occurred from coming into contact with soil at the site.

Wilma Subra, a New Iberia chemist and environmental consultant who helped the Vermilion Association to Protect the Environment bring three parish Superfund sites to the attention of federal officials, said the problem with the study is that "no one tried to find out what caused these cancers and if there was a link to the waste site."
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Cancer

or not.

"As a result, we are left not knowing what caused these cancers because no one looked into it," Subra said.

"The state simply put forth the statistics, but when you have statistically significant differences between the test area and the surrounding area, that's a red flag waving and a valid public health concern that cries out for further study," she said. Subra said she realizes the chances are slim the state would voluntarily fund such studies.

Caesar said a study of another former parish Superfund site, the D.L. Mud site in a sparsely populated area southwest of the city off La. 335, "showed significantly lower numbers of cancers than we expected." The site is adjacent to the parish's third former Superfund site, Gulf Coast Vacuum Services. Cleanup is complete at all three sites.

Caesar said state health officials will continue to monitor the incidence of cancer in the area as a matter of routine. She said federal officials also will monitor groundwater at the former Superfund priority cleanup sites.

Dr. Brian Amy of Abbeville, chief state health officer for Region 4, said there is a 60-day public comment period on the study findings. Residents may review the documents at the main branch of the public library and offer comment through Feb. 9 by calling toll-free, 1-888-293-7020.