City's air quality bad; DEQ says it's staying

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For the third time this year, ozone levels in Baton Rouge reached unhealthy levels, according to the head of air quality for the Department of Environmental Quality.

Furthermore, ozone levels are predicted to be in the unhealthy range for Wednesday and Thursday, according to DEQ's Mike McDaniel.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency standards set 120 parts per billion as the lower limit for an unhealthy level of ozone in the atmosphere. A separate standard translates parts per billion into the Pollution Standard Index. A 120 ppb reading becomes a 100 on that scale.

At Baker on Tuesday afternoon, ozone levels of 146 ppb or 126 on the PSI, according to McDaniel.

DEQ had predicted a likely chance of a so-called ozone "exceedance" for Tuesday through Thursday.

McDaniel said people should "plan accordingly and should know there is a possibility for elevated ozone in the mid-afternoon hours."

Ozone, or smog, is formed in the lower atmosphere when hydrocarbons from industry, natural sources and vehicles mix with nitrogen oxides from cars, power plants and industries to react with sunlight.

Physicians say they generally see a rise in the number of sinus and respiratory complaints when pollution levels rise.

High ozone levels also can cause sore throats, nausea and chest pain, according to the EPA. Research has shown pulmonary effects on human at levels well below the federal standard of 120 ppb.

McDaniel said that "lots of sunshine, very little wind for mixing" — in other words, the current weather conditions — contribute to ozone formation.

"High pressure just tends to give you an almost stagnant meteorology. You're not getting much mixing to carry off ozone precursors and ozone is formed," he said.