The federal Clean Air Act of 1990 generally is associated with large-scale industrial pollution, but it also raises terror—or at least blood pressure—among smaller operations and individuals who've never even claimed the word "ozone" in their vocabulary.

Among them are people in the refrigeration industry, whom the act of late is leaving very cold indeed. Come July of 1992, when repair persons in this business do service on your refrigerator, they will be required to recover the refrigerant gas that until now has been vented.

And you will pay the price, which in the off-the-record ballpark, climbs to 50 percent or more above the present cost of a service call.

"Whether or not we're doing anything to the ozone is irrelevant. That battle is already over, and we lost."

Thompson

The theory is that refrigerant gas depletes the ozone layer, an atmospheric blanket which protects us from the sun's ultraviolet radiation.

Once the gas is recovered, it also must be recycled and reclaimed—processes that involve specific equipment or procedures for disposal via proper authorities.

The cost of undertaking these processes depends on whether the repair person chooses to rent a recovery/recycling machine, which can range about $45 per day, or to buy the machine, now priced from $1,500 to more than twice that much (and up).

"Whether or not we're doing anything to the ozone is irrelevant," said Dan Thompson, a factory representative for Thermal Engineering Company in Toledo, Ohio. "That battle is already over, and we lost."

Thompson was in Lafayette last week to educate area owners and employees of the refrigeration business about the federal ruling. He also advised them how to cope with the added repair expense, and that advice was repeatedly clear: Charge the customer.

"The doctor doesn't hesitate to charge you for that little wooden stick that holds your tongue down," he said, pointing out that it could cost repair persons up to $5 per pound just to get rid of refrigerant gas once it is recovered. Most likely, he said, wholesalers will set up programs to take back recovered gas.

Thompson added that the industry should be prepared to meet the Clean Air Act obligations even sooner, since other federal, state, parish, or city laws can pull the deadline back as far as the 1st of the year. Wisconsin state law, for instance, requires adherence to the act as of January, 1992.

Claiming that the new act is not meant to "punish" the people it affects, Thompson said it should be viewed instead as an opportunity "to help this industry clean up our act." He added, "It makes us more professional, and, hopefully, it also will make us money."

To lure the industry to the change as quickly as possible, the state of Louisiana is offering a tax incentive for any gas recovery machinery bought by Dec. 31 of this year.

Meanwhile, the Cajun chapter of the Refrigeration Service Engineering Society (RSES), which invited Thompson to speak at its meeting last Thursday, intends to push education, not only among its members and associates, but also in the community at large.