DEQ to seek reductions from top toxic polluters

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor

Top toxic polluters in Louisiana will be called in within the next few weeks and asked to produce a waste reduction plan, the secretary of the Department of Environmental Quality said Friday.

Secretary Paul Templet's comments came in response to new federal data that show Louisiana discharging more toxic chemicals to the air, land and water than any other state.

DEQ data released Friday indicate East Baton Rouge Parish is fifth in the state in toxic air emissions — the type of discharges about which Templet said he is most concerned.

Ascension Parish leads that list, emitting more than three times the amount of toxic chemicals of any other parish.

If industries don't voluntarily reduce their discharges, Templet said he will force them to do so through compliance orders.

The latest data indicate "we must move faster rather than slower, as some have suggested," the DEQ secretary said.

"The risk (to the public from toxic pollutants), in my opinion, is too high," Templet said at a press conference.

Asked about a statement by Dr. Joel Nitzkin, who recently took over as head of the Louisiana Office of Public Health and told Newsweek, "if there is a cancer problem related to industry, we believe it is relatively small," Templet voiced disagreement.

"Yes, I tend to disagree with that," Templet said.

Analysis done by DEQ indicates the risks around some Louisiana plants are unacceptably high, said Templet, who taught environmental science at LSU before becoming DEQ secretary.

Cancer maps indicating areas of high incidence also tend to correlate to the areas of high toxic emissions, he said.

Not only does Louisiana lead the nation in toxic discharges, but Louisiana is geographically small compared to some of the other states with high numbers, Templet said.

When the amount of toxic releases are divided by the surface area of the states, things look even worse for Louisiana.

When asked why Louisiana's relative pollution position has not improved,

SEE TOXICS, 4A
despite years of governmental rhetoric, Templet, who has been in office for two years, said he will stand responsible for the 1990 data. By then, he said, the programs he has begun installing should have had a chance to be implemented by industry and, in some cases, get out of court where industry suits have slowed down new DEQ regulations.

The latest data are based on reports submitted by industry last year detailing their 1988 emissions. When adjusted for those materials that have been removed from reporting requirements, there was a 9.2 percent decrease in total discharges by Louisiana, Templet said.

Part of the reason environmental problems have not been adequately addressed is that there have been agencies that took the position that if they didn't admit there was a problem, there wasn't a problem, Templet said.

Asked if some other agencies with environmental responsibilities aren't still taking that attitude, Templet said they are; but he declined to identify them.

Because of the large amount of industry here, Louisiana may never be at the bottom of the toxic's list, but it shouldn't be first, Templet said. States like New Jersey, which have comparable industry, are in the middle of the pack, he said.

Federal data indicate New Jersey ranked 29th in total toxic chemical releases.

East Baton Rouge Parish ranked 9th in overall releases of toxic chemicals behind Jefferson, St. Charles, Ascension, St. James, Calcasieu, Morehouse, St. John the Baptist, and Ouachita parishes.

East Baton Rouge Parish had 5 percent of the state's toxic air emissions. That list was headed by Ascension Parish whose industries emitted 39 percent of the toxic air emissions reported.

St. James Parish led the water list, discharging 71 percent of the reported toxic chemicals discharged to surface waters.

Federal data show Louisiana topped the nearest state, Texas, by more than a million pounds in combined toxic chemicals discharged into the air, land and water. That state's total toxic discharges were 715.7 million pounds.

The figures do not include automobile exhausts, emissions from service stations and from many small business and industries. In some cases, large toxic emissions, such as natural gas dehydration facilities, which often emit huge quantities of the cancer-causing agent benzene, are not included in the numbers.