Shift workers moaned and bar owners cried last year when five of eight parishes surrounding East Baton Rouge adopted earlier bar closing hours, but state police said the move would bolster their efforts to keep drunk drivers off the road.

Thus far, the earlier curfews have had only a slight statistical impact on the total number of accidents in Troop A, but a state police spokesman said the effect should be more significant with the addition of tougher laws against driving while intoxicated.

The two policies — earlier bar curfews and new DWI laws — have provided troopers with the impetus to step up their efforts, as evidenced by the arrest of 48 persons since last Tuesday on drunk driving charges and about 100 in a Saturday speed trap, Edmonson said.

The number of individuals booked with drunken driving during the last five days was “a little bit higher than normal” but did not represent a trend, Edmonson said.

Even though Troop A officers arrested more than half of the suspects — 25 individuals — during task force operations Friday and Saturday nights, Edmonson said, the arrests were “just part of our continuing effort to get drunk drivers off the road,” an effort that includes giving list to make drivers “feel the heat” by more rigorous enforcement.

That effort began in earnest last year when Troop A Commander Wiley McCormick urged several area parish and municipal governing authorities to close bars and stop the sale of alcohol after 2 a.m., as East Baton Rouge Parish did in 1980.

West Baton Rouge Parish ranked its “Gold Coast” bar owners when it switched from all-night bars that catered to Baton Rouge’s party die-hards to a 2 a.m. closing.

Statistically, however, the curfew seems to have had little impact last year on alcohol-related traffic fatalities in West Baton Rouge. Five of the nine fatal accidents in the parish involved alcohol in 1982, while six of the eight fatalities in 1981 were alcohol-related, Edmonson said.

“There’s not a whole lot you can do about fatal accidents,” Edmonson added. “We did see a slight decrease in the total number of accidents in the early mornings, however.”

There were 49 fewer accidents last year than in 1981 in West Baton Rouge Parish, according to the trooper’s statistics. Also, only six of the nine 1982 fatalities occurred between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. as compared to seven out of the eight 1981 traffic deaths, Edmonson said.

Reducing the late-night calls provided the impetus for law enforcement agencies in other south Louisiana parishes and municipalities to support earlier bar-closing hours.

“We tried to get a voluntary closing at 3 a.m., but that didn’t work,” said St. Martin Parish Sheriff Charles A. Puselier. “I didn’t think it was fair to have deputies going from bar to bar stopping fights instead of patrolling the parish, and neither did the citizens.”

Morgan City Police Chief Randy Radcliffe said he felt the same way about his officers and consequently supported a move by major church leaders and an industry organization to end the oil town’s wide-open policies.

Although the Morgan City curfew has been in effect only two months, it has had an impact on the number of calls received after midnight, Radcliffe said.

The beneficial effects of earlier closings for local law enforcement agencies aside, Edmonson said that the curfews in Troop A’s parishes of Iberville, Ascension and East and West Feliciana brought “some reductions in total accidents troop-wide. Hopefully, we’ll see a bigger decline this year.”

The most significant reduction in total accidents occurred in East Baton Rouge, where there were 354 fewer accidents last year than in 1981. State police investigated 1,404 accidents in East Baton Rouge last year as compared to 1,728 in 1981, state police said.

Alcohol was involved in nearly two-thirds of the 18 fatal accidents that killed 21 persons in 1981 and in more than half of the 23 fatal crashes that killed 24 individuals in East Baton Rouge last year, statistics showed.

Throughout the Troop A area, 61 percent of the 71 fatal accidents last year involved alcohol. A total of 83 persons died in those crashes, Edmonson said.

“On any given Friday or Saturday night, one out of 10 drivers in the Troop A area has been drinking or is under the influence of some drug, legal or illegal,” the trooper said.

Federal funds in 1981 helped beef up state police DWI task force efforts, but the number of DWI arrests has remained comparatively stable over a three-year period. DWI arrests in 1980 totaled 1,713, jumped to 1,807 in 1981 and dropped slightly to 1,792 last year, Edmonson said.

Ascension and Iberville parishes showed slight increases in the total number of accidents last year, and about half of the fatal accidents in both parishes involved alcohol, Edmonson said. Ascension dropped from a 3 a.m. curfew to 2 a.m. last year as surrounding parishes began adopting

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closing hours that tracked East and West Baton Rouge. Iberville had been another all-night parish before it adopted the 2 a.m. closing law.

East Feliciana Parish, which went from all-night bars to 2 a.m. weekdays and midnight on weekends, enjoyed a spotless record last year in the fatality bracket and recorded only 174 accidents investigated by Troop A. There were three fatalities in the parish in 1981, one of which was alcohol related.

West Feliciana Parish changed its existing curfew only slightly — from 2:30 to 2 a.m. — but the parish experienced an increase of nine accidents from 1981 to 1982. At the same time, fatalities declined from three in 1981 to one last year. Alcohol was involved in only one accident each year.

Troop A covers the portion of St. James Parish on the east side of the Mississippi River, but fatal accidents in that area jumped significantly last year — from six dead in 1981 to 10 dead in 1982. The 1982 deaths occurred in seven accidents, five of which were alcohol-related, Edmonson said.

While last year’s statistics are promising, Edmonson said, the push toward more arrests this year should show even greater changes at the end of 1983.