The state has postponed a $5 vehicle emissions test fee in the Baton Rouge area because of indecision by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency over sanctions against California.

The annual $5 automobile inspection fee was to have begun on Jan. 1, but state officials have decided not to implement the charge, which would have been used to pay the costs of air emissions inspection equipment.

Sen. Larry Bankston, D-Baton Rouge, who was a lead author in getting the emissions testing program passed in the Legislature, said Friday the governor has decided not to proceed with the fee.

The decision was made, Bankston said, because of the inconsistent positions taken by the EPA in California. "We may not have to impose the fee," Bankston said.

If implemented in Louisiana, the enhanced automobile inspection and maintenance program could cost owners of vehicles that fail to meet standards hundreds of dollars for repairs.

The state Department of Environmental Quality earlier decided to slow its plans for implementing the inspection and maintenance program.

Legislators last month asked the governor and DEQ not to impose the fee until they learned what EPA was going to do about sanctioning California, whose legislature failed to pass legislation requiring an enhanced inspection and maintenance program.

Changes in the federal Clean Air Act of 1990 established air-quality standards, which the six-parish Baton Rouge region and some regions in California and in other states failed to meet.

Threatened with federal sanctions, the Louisiana Legislature passed a bill last year calling for an intensive auto emissions testing and maintenance program, funded by the annual fee.

But EPA has vacillated in its dealings with California. On Friday, EPA announced it had begun a formal process that by the spring could lead to sanctions against California, Illinois and Indiana unless sufficient progress is made in upgrading their vehicle emissions inspection programs.

continued from 1B
programs.
Sanctions could affect as much as $800 million in annual federal funding of California highway projects, the EPA said.

In a Dec. 30 letter from EPA to California, EPA regional administrator Felicia Marcus found California had failed to submit a complete implementation plan for a vehicle inspection and maintenance program.

Rather than immediately imposing sanctions against California as the EPA threatened against Louisiana — the EPA told California it would not impose other sanctions if it submits a complete plan within the next 18 months.

The Legislature was upset last fall when the EPA did not immediately impose sanctions against California after its legislature failed to pass an emissions testing program.

In November, EPA representative Richard Wilson told a Louisiana legislative committee that sanctions would be imposed against California.

However, Louisiana lawmakers didn't believe EPA would take action against politically powerful California, and they asked the governor and DEQ to hold off on the $5 fee until the state learned more about EPA's plans for California.

A few days later, the EPA backed off from sanctions against California.

Led by Louisiana, a group of states have joined together, not to defy EPA but to question the testing system required by EPA and the system's potential for results.

Potential sanctions against California could also lead to a lawsuit, Louisiana legislative staff said.

Over the next two years, the $5 inspection fee was expected to generate $2 million, which DEQ planned to use for equipment and start-up operations.

The inspection fee applied to East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Iberville, Pointe Coupee, Livingston and Ascension parishes.

The emissions inspection and maintenance program is now scheduled to begin only in East Baton Rouge Parish on Jan. 1, 1995.

The law enacted last summer requires motorists to pay an additional $10 for that inspection.

The legislation also provides for random on-road testing, with follow-up at the regular inspection stations for vehicles failing the on-road tests.