Environmentalists cry double-cross on toxic air bill

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor

Environmentalists ambushed industry representatives at an Ozone Task Force meeting Monday evening, alleging that industry had double-crossed them by backing a bill to gut the current state law to reduce toxic air emissions.

The environmentalists accused industry of reaching agreements with them at the bargaining table, then using their political clout at the Legislature to weaken environmental laws.

The Louisiana Chemical Association supports the current toxic air pollution law, which it helped to pass in 1989, said Larry Adcock, manager of Dow Chemical Co. in Plaquemine.

LCA's board of directors just reiterated its support for that law and did not vote to support the bill by Sen. Willie Crain, D-Monroe, which weakens the law, Adcock said. If LCA's staff gave the impression that LCA is behind the bill, it was without the board's authorization.

LCA staff members didn't sign up to speak for or against the bill, but only to give information, said Eloise Wall of Friends of the Environment. They then attacked the regulations that are being written under the current law, giving the impression they support efforts to weaken the law, Wall said.

That bill passed the Senate and awaits action in the House. Gov. Buddy Roemer has indicated he would veto it in order to keep the stronger legislation intact, but some legislators are planning concurrent resolutions in order to keep the Department of Environmental Quality from enforcing regulations under the stronger law.

"Industry is trying to legitimize its efforts" by working on task forces with environmentalists, but is then "working behind the scenes using its legislative clout," said Pam Kaster, president of Citizens for a Clean Environment. "I don't want to be used as a pawn."

Somebody has been using legislative clout, "but let's make sure we accuse the right people," Adcock said.

Wall agreed that the oil and gas industry has been leading the charge to weaken the air pollution law, but indicated that the chemical industry has not helped, despite the public positions it has taken when working with environmentalists on various committees.

"Oil and gas has refused to do anything with us," Wall said. "But you all (the chemical industry) can still help us" with the Legislature.

"It's like LCA is trying to ride both sides of the fence," Kaster said.

While stopping short of threats to halt cooperative efforts with the chemical industry and returning to more adversarial tactics, the environmentalists left the impression they are considering such action.
“This threatens whether or not we can continue to work together,” Kaster said.

If industry is going to throw away regulations that environmentalists, regulators and industry representatives have worked hard to put together over the last year, there’s not much point in environmentalists volunteering to serve on such committees, said Paul Davidson of the Sierra Club.

“I might as well go fishing,” he said.

“We support the act,” passed in 1989 that calls for a 50 percent reduction in emissions of toxic chemicals, said Wayne Leonard of Borden Chemical, “but we don’t like parts of the regulations.”

Bill Moran of BASF said the draft regulations, in their latest form, would force industry to reduce some chemical emissions by 90 percent.

Parts of the regulations require plants to share information in violation of federal anti-trust laws, he said.

Davidson urged industry representatives to bring such issues to the table so that any problems in the regulations can be rectified, but not to allow the Legislature to shoot down the whole regulatory program.

“There are certain things in the toxic air regulations we’re not happy with either,” said Theresa Robert of Save Our Selves.