Lafayette Parish subject of dioxin exposure study

Marsha Sills
Staff Writer

LAKE CHARLES — The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry has selected Lafayette Parish to participate in a dioxin exposure research study.

The federal agency chose Lafayette and Calcasieu parishes for a follow-up study to its 1996 visit to Mossville in Calcasieu, where higher-than-normal dioxin levels were found, said an agency official at a press conference Tuesday in Lake Charles. The official said Lafayette was chosen because it has less industry, a contributing factor to dioxin levels, than Calcasieu.

“We don’t want to scare people. Elevated levels are not something to be alarmed about,” said Deborah Millette, an epidemiologist with the agency.

“We’re asking people to assist in the scientific knowledge in the area of dioxins because there are few human studies.”

The agency will hold an informational meeting for the community at 7 p.m. Thursday in the Holiday Inn Holidome, 2032 N.E. Evangeline Thruway. The study will begin in a few months after households are systematically chosen. Those eligible must be 15 years old and parish residents for at least five years. They must never have lived in Calcasieu Parish.

Dioxin

Dioxins are chemical compounds released as byproducts of combustion and chemical processes. Almost 50 percent of human dioxin exposure comes from consumption of meat, dairy products and fish, which is normal, Millette said. Because human studies on the subject are limited, community participation is key to the study, said Mike Groutt, an agency public affairs specialist.

“Everybody’s heard of dioxins and scared of them, but a lot is not known about what the exposure can cause at lower levels. We’re asking for the cooperation of the community to help us learn more,” Groutt said.

In 1998, the agency studied Mossville after the Environmental Protection Agency found that blood samples contained higher-than-usual dioxin levels in residents there. The elevated dioxin levels were not extreme enough to cause any health damage.

“We want to find out if the 1998 findings were representative of the entire parish and if Calcasieu Parish is representative of southern Louisiana,” Millette said.

She said most people have less than 20 parts per trillion in their systems. About 20 parts per trillion is considered in the higher-than-normal range. Levels of about 400 parts per trillion are believed to be harmful.

At these levels, the first condition is chloracne, a severe acne condition that may cause disfigurement and scarring. Dangerous levels are also associated with cancer and damage to the liver and immune and endocrine systems.

Millette said the body stores dioxin in fat. It takes seven to 12 years to eliminate half of the dioxins in the body. Millette said.

Other related dioxin studies are the Department of Defense’s “Ranch Hand” study, which has followed Air Force Vietnam War veterans exposed to Agent Orange, and a study in Sevastopol, Italy, after an explosion released high levels of dioxins.