Tucked away in the basement of LSU's Middleton Library, David Gay gets a good view of what's going into Louisiana's air.

Gay's window on the winds is his computer screen, which is linked to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Toxicology Data Network, known to Gay and other experts as TOXNET.

Gazing into his amber monitor, Gay can see the quantities of hundreds of toxic chemicals that 250 Louisiana industries report emitted. By rapping a few more keys, he can get a vision of water discharges, deep-well injection or land disposal figures.

The federal data provides interesting comparisons, such as the fact that while New Jersey has 875 reporting industries, compared to 259 in Louisiana, the figures show Louisiana industries discharged far more toxic air pollutants — 138 million pounds to 42 million pounds in New Jersey. It shows the difference in discharges in water was even wider — 775 million pounds into Louisiana waters, compared to 55 million pounds into the waters of New Jersey.

Gay also has access to figures that show Louisiana industry ranked third in the nation in toxic air pollutants discharged and second in toxic water discharges. That information is all based on 1987 reports. The Louisiana Chemical Association says its companies have made significant reductions since then.

From his basement computer, Gay soon will be able to make similar comparisons with 1988 data.

What's more, he's making the data available to the public. Even though there has been no real publicity, he and the graduate students who work with him have begun to get calls from environmental groups, attorneys and law enforcement personnel.

Working with the Department of Environmental Quality, the LSU library was able to get a $1,500 fee waiver from EPA for use of the data base. The library plans soon to get its own disks containing the information so it can continue to provide this service free to the public.

Not only does TOXNET contain data on chemical releases, it also has information on the health impact of more than 90,000 chemicals, how many of them can be best handled and what the applicable regulations are.

Ask about benzene and Gay's printer will spit out pages of information on the substance, including its toxicity and its ability to cause cancer.

By pressing a few more keys, Gay also can get the printer to rattle out the amounts of benzene reported discharged by Louisiana industry, but here some of the system's limitations begin to show up.

For instance, the benzene emissions information doesn't include the massive amounts of the chemical that the Morning Advocate recently showed were being discharged from the state's hundreds of natural gas dehydration...
facilities. It also doesn’t show the huge amounts of benzene lost in fueling cars at service stations or in the fumes from tailpipes.

Though information on hundreds of chemicals and hundreds of plants are plugged into TOXNET, not all toxic chemicals are reported and only larger plants are required to report, though threshold limits are coming down.