Many People Don't Like River Bonfires

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Every Dec. 24, thousands of people turn out to watch as huge bonfires light up the levees north of here lighting the way for Father Christmas as he paddles his Pirogue down the Mississippi River.

But not everyone thinks the fires are such a great idea, and many complain to the Louisiana Lung Association.

“All that soot and ashes settles over their houses, their cars, their plants,” says association spokesman Ben Fontaine.

“They wish the people who build the bonfires would come out and wash their houses. It’s apparently like a forest fire.”

But he said that for the first time in 10 years, he hasn’t heard any complaints that rubber tires or other things that would add noxious fumes to the smoke are being used to help fill the teepee-like structures.

“They started building them about six weeks ago. All you have to do is go up and look into them. You used to be able to see 30 to 40 tires in some of them,” said Fontaine, the association’s education director.

Asphalt, railroad ties, plastic bottles and other goodies also were used as regular additions to the teepee-like structures that line the top of the levee every December.

Fumes from any of these create far worse problems than wood smoke does for people with respiratory problems, he said.

“This year they’re just burning natural wood and bamboo shoots like they’re supposed to,” Fontaine said.

He credits the change to the state Office of Environmental Affairs, which sent out an official notice along the same lines as the Lung Association’s annual plea.

“Back in September, to help avoid any problems, we alerted all the official political agencies and community groups along the river, advising them what problems can be caused by burning petrochemical products.

“And for the first time we can ever recall an official state agency put out a similar request to all of them ... asking them not to burn these types of materials.”

But he noted that more complaints generally come in after the fires are lit than before.

“That’s when the problems take effect. Particularly when there’s no wood, and the smoke and haze settles over the communities.”