Pollution is a serious problem in Louisiana, and the state is not doing enough to combat it, according to the vast majority of voters surveyed in the State Times/Morning Advocate's annual poll. The poll indicated 85 percent of the state's voters see pollution as either serious or extremely serious. Less than 1 percent of those surveyed said pollution was not a problem, while less than 12 percent saw it as not too serious.

The rating the voters gave the state agencies that have responsibility for environmental matters rose from a year ago, but still was 64 percent negative.

As in the past, voters across the southern part of the state, where most of the petroleum and chemical industries are located, are the most concerned about the environment.

The environment ranked behind drugs and the economy in the number of voters who rated it an extremely serious problem, but ranked ahead of the quality of public schools.

Of those surveyed, 39 percent said pollution was extremely serious, while 46 percent rated it as serious. In the southeastern and southwestern portions of the state, 54 percent of the voters described the problem as “extremely serious.”

Only 31 percent of the voters gave the state a positive rating in protecting the environment.

The biggest dissatisfaction was in the southwest where 75 percent of the voters ranked the state's job of environmental protection as “not too good” or “poor.” In the New Orleans area that number was 72 percent, while it totaled 61 percent in the north central, 60 percent in the southeast, 59 percent in the north and 58 percent in the south central.

The main agency with environmental responsibility is the Department of Environmental Quality, but other agencies, including the Department of Health and Hospitals, the Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife and Fisheries and the Agriculture Department also have important environmental responsibilities. Most of them have received some bad publicity for their environmental protection activities in the past year.

While state records indicate DEQ has been taking a more firm enforcement stance, and its funding has increased.
somewhat, much of the environmental news during the last year has been negative.

DEQ has a huge backlog of permit applications, has had a difficult time meeting some of its federal commitments, and has been criticized in a couple of cases for temporarily refusing to provide information that some felt to be public information.

Likewise, the health department received negative publicity for announcing it was canceling a meeting about PCBs in a public water supply, because a member of the press and a representative of the attorney general's office were present.

The health department also was criticized by some groups for not halting the sale of trout from the Calcasieu River despite going along with DEQ in issuing an advisory against eating the fish.

DNR has been criticized for the job it has done in protecting the environment from oilfield waste. That agency also has been fighting a losing battle against coastal erosion.

The Agriculture Department has received negative publicity for its handling of pesticide matters.

Environmental groups also have attacked some members of the Legislature for not supporting stronger laws and providing more funds to protect the environment.

During the past year, figures released by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency showed Louisiana among the leaders in toxic air emissions, toxic water discharges and disposal of hazardous wastes.

Baton Rouge was listed as one of the 31 cities with the worst smog problems in the nation.

Baton Rouge was on a federal list as one of the 31 cities with the worst smog problems in the nation.

Being on that list has made it more difficult for new industries to open in these areas.

During the past year, the state did strengthen laws and regulations dealing with toxic air pollution, water pollution, radioactive materials in the oilfield and land disposal of hazardous waste.

Whites were more likely to see the pollution problem as extremely serious than blacks, (43 percent to 28 percent). Women (41 percent) were more likely to label the problem extremely serious than men (38 percent).

Independents and Democrats (both 40 percent) were more likely to say the problem was extremely serious than Republicans (34 percent). Union members were slightly more likely to see pollution as an extremely serious problem than non-union members (42 percent to 39 percent).

Those with post-graduate degrees (44 percent) were most likely to see the problem as extremely serious, while those with less than a high school education were less likely to rate the problem that severe (32 percent).

The poll also indicated that persons with higher incomes were more acutely concerned about the environment than those with lower incomes.

Of those making more than $45,000 a year, 44 percent saw the problem as extremely serious. That number fell gradually to 35 percent for those making less than $15,000 a year.