Officials consider task force to help solve state murders

By The Associated Press

Most of the victims were black women. Their bodies were nude or partially clothed when discovered. Some were so decomposed the cause of death was impossible to determine.

Detectives don’t know for sure, but they think all of the victims died violently before their bodies were dumped on highways threading along the western shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

Investigators in Tangipahoa, St. John the Baptist and St. Charles parishes, where the dozen bodies were discovered since 1992, said the main obstacle to solving the murders is identifying the victims and learning where they were last seen alive and what they were doing.

Five bodies were found in St. John the Baptist Parish, deputies said. Four similar homicides involving unidentified bodies remain unsolved in St. Charles Parish. Three cases are pending in Tangipahoa Parish.

Authorities in the three parishes want to form a task force to help solve the murders.

The FBI is not actively involved in the investigations, but it is prepared to offer laboratory and technical assistance, said agency spokesman John Rook in New Orleans.

"Murder knows no jurisdiction," Roland Ladreyt, chief of detectives for St. Charles Parish, said.

A task force, Ladreyt said, would help law enforcement officials better coordinate their efforts.

The bodies in St. Charles Parish were found on Interstate 310, Interstate 10 and a nearby state highway. The unidentified body discovered most recently turned up March 23 in Tangipahoa Parish near Al Bayou, off Interstate 55 south of Ponchatoula.

The white woman had been dead for possibly seven months. She was wearing a green surgical scrub shirt and jeans.

Detective Chief Chester Pritchett of Tangipahoa Parish said the Ponchatoula crime scene mirrors two others where two black women were discovered in February 1994.

All three women were thrown from the southbound lane of an elevated portion of the interstate, he said.

Chief of Detectives Bobby Hay of St. John the Baptist Parish said he would like to involve Orleans and Jefferson parishes in the task force because the tentatively identified victims found in his area were believed to be from those parishes.

In the dozen cases, most of the victims were killed, then carried to the sites where they were dumped, Hay said.

"We can say the disposal site and murder site are not one and the same," he said.

Some of the victims found in St. John Parish may have died from drug overdoses, but the bodies were so decomposed an official cause of death could not be determined, Ladreyt said.

"We work with what we’re given," he said.