Ozone levels in violation for fourth day

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor

Ozone pollution soared to the “very unhealthful level” Tuesday as the Baton Rouge area violated federal air quality standards for the fourth consecutive day and many people began to suffer health effects.

The Pollutant Standards Index reached 201 at the State Capitol, the highest ever reached at that monitor. It was the third or fourth highest reading ever recorded in the city and the highest reading in Baton Rouge in eight years, said Gus Von Bodungen, head of the Department of Environmental Quality’s air division.

A reading of 100 is “unhealthful” and corresponds to a violation of federal air
standards. A reading of 200 is considered "very unhealthful."

Monitors at LSU, Port Allen and Carville also recorded readings in the "unhealthful" range.

Some doctors said they also are seeing effects of pollution levels in other monitors — their patients.

Dr. Roger Elofson II, a local pediatrician, said the number of children he is seeing with upper respiratory problems has definitely risen this week.

Elofson said he also is seeing wheezing in children with asthma and he expects the number of asthma cases to be even higher Wednesday.

Dr. James Kidd III, who specializes in allergies and asthma, said he, too, is seeing increasing problems and expects to see even more by Thursday.

People with allergies also may be hit especially hard, since they may have inflammation from an allergy compounded by inflammation from ozone pollution, Kidd said.

Dr. Floyd Roberts, a pulmonary specialist, said he has seen a large increase in upper respiratory complaints in the last two days. The main complaints have been sore throats and sinus problems, two common symptoms of high levels of ozone exposure.

Roberts said there also has been an increase in lung complaints, though not as much as he usually sees in periods of high ozone pollution.

In some cases, it is several days before lung problems build up enough for patients to seek medical attention, he said.

The doctors were hopeful that rain that hit parts of the area Tuesday afternoon will help to wash ozone from the air and bring the pollution levels down.

Von Bodungen said late Tuesday he expects the situation to be much better on Wednesday.

He said ozone levels rose steadily from about 9 a.m. Tuesday and did not fall off until late afternoon.

When an ozone incident begins that early, it is almost certainly locally generated, he said.

Stagnant air and a buildup of pollutants over several days have been the cause of the long period of high ozone levels, according to DEQ.

Ozone is formed when hydrocarbons mix with nitrogen oxide and undergo a reaction caused by sunlight. State officials say it appears the area will have to decrease both hydrocarbon and nitrogen oxide emissions to lower the ozone pollution problem. Vehicles and industry are two major contributors of the pollutants.

It was the 10th time this year the Baton Rouge area has violated the federal air standards for the pollutant ozone.

Monday afternoon, air quality went over the federal standard at the State Capitol and Carville monitors. The LSU monitor was not operational for part of the day.

Sunday, the LSU monitor and the Carville monitor registered violations, according to DEQ records, which also show violations on Saturday at LSU, Baker, Port Allen and the State Capitol.