Ozone-related health problems cited

By BOB ANDERSON
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NEW ORLEANS — Ozone, a pollutant that has long plagued Baton Rouge's air, is causing health problems for many people in the nation, a top Environmental Protection Agency official said here Monday.

New health studies show the current ozone standard leaves little margin for safety, said J. Craig Potter of EPA.

Baton Rouge is designated a "non-attainment area" by EPA because of repeated violations of the ozone standard.

Based on the most recent data, EPA must enforce the ozone regulations and some areas will have to implement new controls, Potter told the National Conference of State Legislators.

People are suffering from ozone pollution without realizing the cause, he said.

"They think they have a tendency to get colds or pulmonary problems and don't relate it to the pollutant," Potter said.

It's not just people who have asthma or chronic lung problems who are being affected, he said.

"We're seeing health effects in normal, healthy individuals," he said.

"Healthy individuals are suffering."

People are getting pneumonia, asthmatic conditions and ending up in the hospital because of the pollutant, Potter told the legislators.

He said 25 percent to 35 percent of the nation's population has a high sensitivity to ozone pollution.

But, he said, the public doesn't realize the extent of the problem.

Unfortunately EPA has had to use the "gorilla in the closet" tactic in order to enforce compliance with ozone standards. He hopes that will change as the public becomes better educated about the situation.

The "gorilla in the closet" refers to the threat of economic sanctions against areas that do not meet the standard.

Louisiana air quality officials say that 75 percent of Baton Rouge's problem is caused by industry and 25 percent by automobiles.

In the area of acid rain, Potter said EPA doesn't have the data to clearly define the problem or to effectively come up with a solution.

The agency has no legal mandate to control acid rain, but it's required to review regulations on sulfur dioxide emissions that cause it.

Recent health studies indicate a need for a standard that will require major reductions in sulfur dioxide emissions in some areas.

Those reductions will fall mainly on utility companies and will be very expensive if current technology is used, Potter told the legislators.

But there is innovative technology becoming available that will greatly reduce the cost, he said.

"There's no question that there's a need for action," Potter said.