Ozone again hits unhealthful level

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The air pollution level in Baton Rouge on Friday was in the unhealthful range for the sixth time this year and for the second day in a row.

The LSU monitor picked up a reading of 165 on the Pollutant Standards Index between 11 a.m. and noon. But, a reading at the Capitol between 1 and 2 p.m. showed the level of pollution in the air, mostly ozone, had fallen to 83.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers anything above 100 on the index to be unhealthful.

On Thursday, monitors at LSU, the Capitol and Carville picked up an afternoon reading of 131, and a week earlier, the downtown monitor picked up the second-highest reading ever recorded in Baton Rouge — 207.

On Friday, the Department of Environmental Quality issued a warning that "persons with respiratory ailments should reduce physical exertions and outdoor activity" when readings are in the unhealthful range, such as they were Thursday and Friday.

Mike McDaniel, head of DEQ's Office of Air Quality, said the type of weather Baton Rouge is experiencing causes the high level of hydrocarbons in the air to manifest itself in high pollution readings.

Ozone is formed when sunlight strikes hydrocarbons emitted by industry, automobiles and other small sources, such as laundromats and paint shops.

McDaniel said a lack of wind, high temperatures and the abundance of sunshine during summer months in Baton Rouge escalate the problem of hydrocarbon emissions.

Baton Rouge remains on a federal non-compliance list, along with 67 other metropolitan areas in the country, because of repeated violations of federal clean air standards and will be required to take action to solve the problem or face penalties.

However, Tom Diggs with the EPA in Dallas said the EPA is unlikely to impose penalties on areas as long as efforts are being made to comply with federal guidelines.

According to McDaniel, the composition of the hydrocarbon emissions rather than the total amount of hydrocarbons in the air is the crucial factor in the ozone problem.

According to the EPA, if ozone levels are in the unhealthful range, people can begin to experience ozone-related health problems, including nasal
congestion, sore throats, nausea, chest pain, coughing, wheezing, pulmonary congestion and labored breathing.

The number of respiratory complaints increases when Baton Rouge's ozone levels are high, according to several local health experts.