Panel to study ozone problem

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The Department of Environmental Quality and area industries have formed a joint committee to "address the technical aspects of the ozone problem" in the Baton Rouge area, according to DEQ Secretary Paul Templet.

"I have asked industry to be part of the solution to this community problem we are faced with," Templet said. "They have offered their top technical people to assist us in compiling an up-to-date, seven-parish emission inventory."

The committee also will design a "comprehensive ambient air monitoring system for the area" to help in understanding the reason ozone levels continue to exceed federal standards, Templet said.

Strategic location of the monitors will help DEQ to study episodes of high ozone and to determine where to concentrate on emission reductions, he said. The system will monitor reactive hydrocarbons, which combine with nitrogen oxide and sunlight to form ozone.

The emission inventory will include stationary, mobile and natural sources of both hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxide, the DEQ secretary said.

The inventory and monitoring results will help provide data to be used by DEQ in creating a plan to deal with the problem, according to DEQ officials.

Severe ozone pollution this summer will push the Baton Rouge area into a higher bracket on the federal non-attainment list when it comes out next year, according to Mike McDaniel, DEQ's assistant secretary in charge of air quality. That means the state will have to take more stringent measures to reduce the air pollution problem.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency already has ordered Louisiana to come up with a better plan for reducing ozone to acceptable levels.

Failure to follow EPA's directive could result in severe penalties. The area already is suffering economically from the ozone problem, because major new sources of hydrocarbon emissions can't move into the area unless they can purchase pollution reduction credits from existing firms to offset the added pollution the new sites would cause.

Companies earn credits when they reduce hydrocarbon emissions more than required by law. However, most plants are holding tightly to such credits for their own expansions.

A stronger emission inspection program on automobiles and tighter emission controls on industry are expected to be part of the plan. An increase in asthmatic complaints, upper respiratory problems, eye irritation and sinus problems have been reported by local physicians during periods of high ozone concentrations here.