NEW ORLEANS — Pesticides pose the greatest environmental risk to the health of people in this region, according to a study done by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 6.

The broad use of pesticides across the states in this region and the cancer risk they pose were among the reasons for the high ranking, said Gerald Carney of EPA, who unveiled the results of the study at a conference here Wednesday.

Maps of pesticide use showed large parts of Louisiana as pesticide hot spots.

Dangers to consumers who eat food tainted with pesticides and the potential for ground water contamination from pesticide application were part of the equation, with the biggest exposure risk being to farm workers, Carney said.

Radon gas and other indoor air pollution problems ranked next in the list of 26 environmental risks to health that were assessed.

However, Louisiana probably has the lowest radon levels of any state in the region, Carney said.

Household use of pesticides and other chemicals played a role in the dangers of indoor pollution, but the biggest factor is cigarette smoke, if there are smokers in the house.

Ozone and carbon monoxide exposure followed, largely due to the risks posed to susceptible populations in the several ozone non-attainment areas of the region.
The Baton Rouge area is one of the places that fails to meet ozone standards.

The at-risk population includes children, the elderly, asthmatics and other people with respiratory problems, though health experts say high ozone levels also can affect healthy individuals in the prime of life, particularly when exposures come in conjunction with exercise.

So far, EPA only has assessed the risks on a regionwide basis, so some problems such as ozone and toxic air pollutants may rank as higher risks in certain areas where there is extensive exposure to industrial emissions, Carney said.

EPA eventually will break the risk factors down on a county-by-county basis to better show which risks are faced by individual communities.

Toxic air pollutants ranked seventh on the list of dangers to public health in the region as a whole, but a map of where the bulk of those emissions are taking place showed the industrial corridor along the Mississippi River and most of coastal Louisiana to be among the most affected areas.

Across the region, stratospheric ozone depletion, which can make people more susceptible to skin cancer because ozone is not present to screen out harmful ultraviolet radiation, ranked fifth on the list and drinking water hazards ranked sixth.

Pesticides and discharge of other toxic chemicals play a role in the drinking water hazards, Carney said.

A separate look at dangers to the region’s environment itself, as opposed to public health, listed degradation of ecosystems as the biggest threat and pesticide application as second.

Degradation of water and wetlands was third, followed by global warming and stratospheric ozone depletion.

Carney said the rankings will help EPA made determinations about where to best use its resources.