Report cites need to control La. air pollution

By BOB ANDERSON

An unbound copy of that report, obtained in advance from one of the task force members, says that high cancer rates in Louisiana have no single cause, but that pollution of air and water appears to be a factor along with diet, personal habits and occupational exposure to chemicals.

Known cancer-causing agents, such as vinyl chloride, carbon tetrachloride, benzene and trichloroethylene, as well as a number of suspected carcinogens have been found in the air in Baton Rouge, Plaquemine and Geismar, the task force says.

While the state does routinely monitor for some materials, “there are toxic air pollutants that are of concern that are not presently included in monitoring programs in Louisiana,” according to the report. Officials with the state, planning office confirmed that the unbound report is the same as the report to be issued Thursday, except for the addition of some graphic material.

“Many of the studies show that there is a very strong association between exposure to these pollutants and increased risk of cancer,” the report says.

“While the magnitude of that contribution is quite controversial,” the report concludes, “it is important to note that there is still general agreement that, cigarettes smoking is an “overwhelming cause” of lung cancer, but environmental pollution appears to be a contributing factor, the task force says, adding: “The magnitude of that contribution is quite controversial.”

Action to protect public health needs
carcinogens, Louisiana should not be assumed to fit within the national average, according to the report. Much is still not known about the cancer-causing effects of chemicals, the report states. More than 200 compounds are known to cause cancer in animals, but there is "a backlog of 70,000 untested industrial organic chemical compounds, with 1,000 chemicals being added to the list each year."

Today's cancer rates reflect carcinogenic exposure of the previous 10 to 30 years, while cancers caused by present exposure will not be detected for years, the task force says.

While the study does point a finger at industrial chemicals, it also notes that alcohol, poor nutrition and other factors are also important, with cigarette smoking being the major cause of lung cancer.

Another cause of cancer, according to the report, is the use of various chemicals and pesticides in the home. "The available data suggest that no single cause can explain the high incidence of cancer in Louisiana," the report states.

Among the report's recommendations are that the state take the following actions:

- Make a commitment to a comprehensive environmental quality program that includes management of air and water quality, hazardous waste and occupational exposures.
- Make a substantial financial commitment to provide research on cancer in Louisiana.
- Fund the Louisiana Tumor Registry so that it can be expanded statewide and provide additional information.
- Set up a statewide birth defects registry showing the place of residence, smoking habits and occupation of the parents.
- Study the causes of birth defects in the state.
- Evaluate the mutagenic and possible carcinogenic potential of Louisiana air.
- Conduct biological assays to determine the amount of cancer-causing materials in bodies of selected individuals.
- Set up a permanent team of legal, medical and scientific advisers to help develop governmental policies.
- Set up a program that integrates the management of toxic substances, hazardous materials and environmental toxicology.
- Regulate and control hazardous air pollutants.
- Organize a surveillance program to determine the presence and level of potential carcinogens.
- Compile an annual pesticide use report on carcinogenic and suspected cancer-causing agents.

- Monitor carcinogens in water bodies, using chemical and biological indicators, such as tumors in fish.
- Accelerate and fund cleanup of abandoned hazardous waste sites.
- Assess the potential risks associated with hazardous waste sites, such as contamination of air and of ground and surface waters.
- Develop uniform guidelines for use in cancer risk assessment.
- Ensure that workers exposed to carcinogens are adequately protected by developing an occupational health program.
- Require companies to keep records of use and worker exposure to known cancer-causing agents.

The task force report also notes that a study has shown increased rates of gastrointestinal and genitourinary cancers in the populations of parishes that take their drinking water from the Mississippi River.

"A consistent, significantly increased risk for rectal cancer mortality was noted for males and females having lifetime use of surface water as a primary drinking water source, and some increased risk was noted for kidney cancer," according to the report.

Cancer-causing chemicals reach surface waters from industries, pesticides used on agriculture, urban runoff and other sources, the task force says.

Even though levels may be "extremely low in the water," they may accumulate in the organisms of the food chain, which includes man at the top.

"Bioaccumulation and biomagnification of carcinogens and other toxic substances can occur within the food chain, concentrating them to dangerous levels," the report states.

Cancer-causing agents may also enter a community's air and water from hazardous waste sites, according to the report.

While 300 waste sites in the state are scheduled to be evaluated using federal funds, they will not necessarily be found eligible for Superfund clean-up money, the task force says.

The group suggests that the state will have to face the burden of cleaning up those sites that need it.

The state produces "significant volumes of chemical carcinogens," according to the report, which says that 16 percent of the chemical production consists of materials that cause cancer.

"Of Louisiana's 98 major chemical products, 11 are recognized as carcinogens" by the federal government.

The report cited an estimate by the government that 20 to 30 percent of cancers are related to occupational factors, and said that it is likely to be higher in areas of the country where concentrations are greater.

Another scientific team has estimated that only 4 or 5 percent of cancers are occupationally induced, the study noted.

Since Louisiana may have greater exposure to environmental toxicants, the report concludes that the state should be cautious in protecting the public from toxic hazards. The report states that "extreme caution in protecting the public from toxic hazards" is warranted.

The report notes that the complexity of the cancer issue "will require continual monitoring and evaluation of trends and patterns of cancer incidence and mortality." The cancer rate among Louisiana's population of parishes has shown increased rates of gastrointestinal and genitourinary cancers. The report calls for a comprehensive environmental quality program that includes management of air and water quality, hazardous waste and occupational exposures.

The task force also recommends that the state take the following actions:

- Communicate with the public about the risk of cancer from environmental exposures.
- Develop guidelines for the evaluation of cancer risks from environmental exposures.
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