French firm planning to build plant here

By BOBBY LAMB
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French chemical company Rhone-Poulenc is planning to construct a $120 million vanillin plant near its Baton Rouge Stauffer Chemical Co. facility.

The plant will create about 400 construction jobs during its peak construction period and generate about 120 permanent jobs, sources said.

Completion is expected during 1992. Gov. Buddy Roemer and executives from the company’s American headquarters in New Jersey are expected to participate in an announcement at a 3:30 p.m. press conference Friday.

Company and state officials refused Thursday to comment on the proposed plant, preferring to wait for Friday’s news conference.

Rhone-Poulenc chose Louisiana over West Virginia after eliminating Texas from its original site list, sources said.

Vanillin occurs naturally in various plants, but usually is made synthetically. It is a principal component in vanilla and is used primarily as a flavoring and in perfumes. A major market is cosmetics. Rhone-Poulenc, an $8.8 billion nationalized French company, produces cosmetics and in 1986 purchased Monsanto Co.’s vanillin business, according to a recent Chemical Week magazine article on France’s chemical industry.

The firm’s Baton Rouge ties evolved from a $522-million acquisition last year of Stauffer’s inorganic chemicals business from former owner ICI America’s. That purchase included Stauffer plants in Baton Rouge, Springhill and Bastrop.

The firm is in the midst of a major international expansion and acquisitions program, Chemical Week reported.

U.S.-based acquisitions and growth have boosted Rhone-Poulenc’s sales in America to $1.3 billion, about 11 percent of the firm’s total sales, the magazine said.

Earlier this year, Rhone-Poulenc raised $875 million in a capital issue to pursue its multinational acquisitions program, capital investments and research and development.

Rhone-Poulenc is based in Courbevoie Cedex, France, and oversees U.S. operations from Monmouth, N.J. The firm employs more than 85,000 people.

In addition to cosmetics, Rhone-Poulenc produces basic and specialty chemicals, fertilizers, pesticides, drugs, vitamins and animal feeds.