Poll shows residents feel pollution problem serious

La. receives better marks than last year's survey

Concern about pollution is growing and Louisiana voters are still dissatisfied with the state's environmental protection effort, though public perception of the state's program has improved, according to a poll conducted for the Advocate.

More than eight of 10 voters surveyed think pollution in Louisiana is serious or extremely serious.

The survey indicates 53 percent of the state's voters think state government is not doing well in its responsibility for protecting the environment. A year ago, however, that figure was 60 percent.

Both the incoming and outgoing heads of the Department of Environmental Quality said they, too, would have categorized the state's pollution problems as serious if they were polled, but they both said they would give the state better marks on its environmental program.

The percentage of voters who think the state's environmental situation is extremely serious grew from 29 percent in 1990 to 35 percent in 1991, according to the poll conducted by Ed Renwick of Loyola University.

From Dec. 1 through Dec. 11, Renwick surveyed approximately 600 registered Louisiana voters by telephone. The poll's error factor is plus or minus 3.3 points.

The percentage of those who think pollution in Louisiana is extremely serious rises steadily in correlation to educational background. Of those who did not graduate from high school, 31.4 percent have that opinion, while 44.4 percent of those with postgraduate degrees think pollution is very serious.

New Orleans residents were most likely to express concern about pollution.

Of voters surveyed in the New Orleans area, 51.2 percent said pollution is extremely serious and 40.3 percent said it is serious.

In the Southeast region, where much of the state's industry is located, 87.5 percent of those surveyed said pollution is serious or
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extremely serious. In the North Central part of the state, where there is little heavy industry, that percentage falls to 67.8.

Oddly enough, the percentages of voters giving the state good marks in fighting pollution are highest in the Southeast and South Central parts of the state.

Voters in the Orleans area are least likely to say the state is doing a good job. Only 32.7 percent of New Orleans area voters surveyed rank the job as “pretty good” or better, while 64.9 percent said the state’s response is “not too good” or “poor.”

Democrats, blacks and women are more likely than their counterparts to give the state good marks.

Paul Templet, who left the DEQ secretary post the week of Jan. 6, said that while he would rate his agency as “excellent” in the job it has done on protecting the environment, he would have to rate the state overall as “between good and not too good.”

There are other state agencies that have environmental responsibilities that haven’t exerted the effort DEQ has, Templet said.

Asked how he would rate the state’s pollution problem, he said he would rate it as “serious,” but four years ago, when he took office, he would have rated it “extremely serious.”

Since then there have been major reductions in releases of toxic chemicals, Templet said.

“Citizens perceive correctly that the environment is a problem in Louisiana,” Templet said when asked about the poll results. The fact that the percentage of people who feel the state is doing a poor job has fallen is “heartening.”

There is a “lag time” between the actions state agencies take and the time the results are perceived by the public, he said. Some of the regulations DEQ wrote in the past four years give industries time to gear up to meet them and won’t show results for a couple of more years.

Kai Midboe, DEQ’s new secretary, agreed the concerns reflected by the poll are not unfounded.

“The question is how are we going to go about solving those problems,” Midboe said.

Asked how he would have responded if questioned by pollsters, Midboe said he would have categorized Louisiana’s pollution problem as “serious,” and would have said the state currently is doing “a fairly good job” of environmental protection.

In the poll, blacks were far more likely than whites to think environmental protection will improve under the administration of Gov. Edwin Edwards.

Overall, 30 percent of those surveyed said they think environmental protection will improve under Edwards, while 19 percent think it will get worse and 44 percent think it will stay the same.

The percentage of people thinking pollution is serious or extremely serious rises with income level, from 78.2 percent with an income under $15,000 to 85.8 percent for those with an income between $30,000 and $45,000 and then drops slightly to 85.1 percent for those with incomes above $45,000.

Women and Democrats are more likely than men and people with other political affiliations to be concerned about the state of Louisiana’s environment.

Pollution runs behind drugs, health care costs, crime, unemployment and political corruption in the percentage of Louisiana voters who see it as a serious problem, but it ranks above the quality of public schools, racial tension and sexual harassment, the poll indicates.