State officials say case strong to prevent sanctions

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State officials say they have a strong case that they hope will prevent federal officials from implementing sanctions against East Baton Rouge and four other parishes.

"We have made some great strides in environmental matters and are ready to deal with this," Gov. Treen said.

Treen predicted that the state will not lose any federal dollars because of the alleged failure of the five parishes to meet federal air standards. The parishes also face a moratorium on new industry that would produce large amounts of hydrocarbons.

"We have every reason to believe the sanctions will not be imposed," Natural Resources Secretary Frank Simoneaux said.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will propose the sanctions Tuesday.

Simoneaux said EPA is misinterpreting the law when it says there is no choice but to force the sanctions. The state has made a good faith effort to improve air quality, he said.

The state can make its best case for West Baton Rouge, Orleans and St. Bernard parishes, said Gus Von Bodungen, who heads the DNR air quality section.

West Baton Rouge has no heavy industry and is being influenced by the pollution sources from Baton Rouge, he said.

The monitors in Orleans and St. Bernard recorded only one day in which the ozone limits were exceeded, which is acceptable, Von Bodungen said.

EPA is lumping those parishes with Jefferson, because they comprise a standard metropolitan statistical area, Von Bodungen said.

The monitoring station in Kenner recorded six days over the limit, which failed the entire metropolitan area, he said.

He said he will argue to EPA that West Baton Rouge, Orleans and St. Bernard should not face any sanctions. The moratorium on new industry and expansion will not be important at the moment, because of depressed economic conditions, said Fred Loy, head of the Louisiana Chemical Association.

But Loy said the effect could be very detrimental in the future, when the economy starts to improve.

Ross Vincent, head of the Ecology Center in New Orleans, said the state may find it more difficult to meet the air standards when the economy does start to improve.

Improvements in the state's air in the past may be attributed to reduced production by industry than to improved pollution control, he said.

Vincent also questioned EPA's sincerity in imposing sanctions for failure to meet standards.

Based on prior performance by the current administration's EPA, Vincent said, he feels the agency is trying to force a weakening of the Clean Air Act by forcing the sanctions. If EPA comes down hard, local governments and industries will call their Congressional leaders with complaints that the law is too strict, he said.

The EPA is "talking about punishing the wrong people," Mayor Screen said.

The city-parish is not responsible for those polluting the air, but stands to lose high development and potential taxes from new major industries.

"The city-parish doesn't generate bad air," Screen said.

Ozone, which causes respiratory problems in humans, is caused by hydrocarbons from vehicles and industrial plants interacting with sunlight. Sunny summer days are the worst conditions for ozone pollution, he said.

The worst ozone count in the Baton Rouge area occurred on June 6-8 last year. The highest reading during 1982 was June 7 at the Carville station, which recorded ozone levels 60 percent higher than the federal standard of one part per 8 million parts of air.

All four stations in the Baton Rouge area reported more than one day of air that violated the ozone standards.

Simoneaux said that most of the stations reported fewer violations last year than in 1981. He said the one day was lower because industrial pollution has been decreased.

Simoneaux said Louisiana is one of few states that addresses ozone emissions with a statewide comprehensive plan.