Study disputes smoking-cancer rate here

By BOB ANDERSON
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Excessive lung cancer rates in Louisiana, across the southeastern United States and up the Mississippi River can’t be attributed to smoking and appear to have an environmental cause, a nationally known epidemiologist said here Thursday.

Although his years of research have not isolated the exact cause of the excessive cancer rates in the area, Jeff Beaubier — an author of U.S. Cancer Mortality Rates and Trends, 1950-1979 — said his opinion is the high use of insecticides coupled with geology that lends itself to groundwater pollution are suspects.

There could be multiple factors, Beaubier said, adding that he wouldn’t rule out industrial pollution as a risk factor, although he noted there are lung cancer hot spots that are not industrialized in the southeast.

“It’s not just smoking,” he said, noting how the high cancer rates tend to follow river basins and coastal areas. “Smoking patterns would not be this related to river patterns.”

While smoking is the main cause of lung cancer, he said, it can’t be blamed for the excessive cancer rates.

“We’re zeroing in on an environmental effect,” Beaubier told officials from various state agencies Thursday.

At this point, his opinions are “not cleared” by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, for which he works, and are based on his own post-doctoral research at Johns Hopkins University, Beaubier said.

In looking at Louisiana and Georgia, the preliminary numbers indicate a correlation between the amount of pesticides used and lung cancer rates, he said.

If pesticides are a major culprit in lung cancer, it could be through breathing of pesticide mist, skin absorption or ingestion, the epidemiologist said.

Geologic factors and soil types make the southeastern coastal plain, where excess lung cancer rates are concentrated, conducive to leaching into groundwater, he said.

“Louisiana is in the eye of the storm,” he said. “By understanding the factors” that cause high lung cancer rates in Louisiana, researchers could “find clues to solve the whole pattern.”

Beaubier noted that Louisiana is well above any other state in lung cancer deaths among white males.

Lung cancer is on the increase in the parishes and counties along the Mississippi River up to Missouri, he said. The increase is particularly high in the latest available figures for the upper reaches of that stretch.

Much of the land in that area has been cleared and turned into farmland in the last few decades, he said.

Of the top 60 counties in the nation for lung cancer deaths in white males, 47 are in the coastal plains of the southeast, including nine in Louisiana, he said.

Black represents the counties with the highest cancer levels, followed in descending order by red, dark blue and light blue, which are all above normal. White represents normal background levels. Vast expanses of the north and west areas of the map (not shown) are white.