One of the first acts of the new Department of Environmental Quality will be to launch a study that explores the relationship between drinking water and certain types of cancers in 14 parishes, including East Baton Rouge.

Such research is "tremendously important in guiding future program directions, regulatory efforts and research on specific compounds that may influence cancer incidences," said Winston Day, who will head the new department.

"Basic research of this nature has been lacking in the past," he said.

The study will analyze information gathered on nearly 1,200 cases of colon and rectal cancer diagnosed between 1978 and 1981.

Day said Dr. Marise Gottlieb, a leading cancer researcher, has been chosen to analyze the information.

Dr. Gottlieb of the Tulane University School of Medicine will identify those water sources associated with higher than expected incidences of colon and rectal cancer, Day said.

She will also try to determine whether differing water treatment processes contribute to differing health risks.

The parishes involved include those that use the Mississippi River for a drinking water source and others that get their drinking water from underground aquifers.

The $42,000 contract will be the first to be awarded under a 1983 law that dedicated the interest earned on the Environmental Emergency Response Fund to environmentally-related health research and issues.

The fund comes from fines levied by the Environmental Control Commission and the Department of Natural Resources against firms that have been caught illegally polluting the state's environment.

"Access to the funds provides the new DEQ with a badly needed capability for research and planning that will be a top priority of the department," Day said.

The study will also consider the time length the water has been used and how that relates to high and low cancer risks.

Factors such as smoking, diet and occupational exposures to chemicals will be considered in the statistical analysis.

The cancer cases were identified through a study done under a 1980 state grant.

Dr. Gottlieb's study is scheduled for completion this summer.

The parishes included in the study are East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Iberville, Ascension, St. James, St. John, St. Charles, Jefferson, Plaquemines, Iberia, St. Martin, Pointe Coupee, Livingston and Tangipahoa.