Sugar cane fires blamed for bad air in Acadiana

By MIKE DUNNE
Advocate staff writer

Burning sugar cane fields exposed many south Louisiana residents to undue smoke and small particles of ash for about one third of 1999, a New Iberia toxicologist said Saturday.

Wilma Subra recounted a litany of health and safety problems caused by the smoke and ash (called particulates) coming from sugar cane fields since September.

"One-third of 1999, you were breathing unhealthy air," Subra told the "Take Back Your Air Community Conference" held at the Embassy Suites Hotel here.

Farmers used to cut the cane, "lay it on the ground, and burn it in a smoldering fire,"
Subra said. Now, farmers are using a new harvesting technique and burn cane standing up. Sometimes they burn it a second time.

"It is like a forest fire spreading like you see on TV in California, and smoke and particulates travel as far as 10 miles," she said.

Subra and others formed a group that is looking for a solution for "zero emissions and not put farmers out of business."

In recent news stories, Charley Richard, vice president and director of the American Sugar Cane League, has said, "We wish we didn't have to burn, but from an economic standpoint we have to."

Without burning, harvesting could cost an additional 25 percent and increase the risk of a damaging freeze.

Conference attendees also heard from Patricia Williams, director of the occupational toxicology outreach program at LSU Medical Center in Shreveport. Williams took the audience on a trip through the lungs. She said hair and mucous trap particles and help expel them as a defense system.

But that natural defense can be destroyed by smoking and inhaling chemicals and particulates, causing the airways to constrict.

At the ends of the smallest tubes are 200,000 air sacs where the air and blood mix. When attacked, the cells produce fluids which build up, causing more breathing difficulty or, in some cases, produce histamines that further constrict airways and muscles.

"Tiny, tiny particles are more dangerous because they can go all the way down" to the air sacs, she said. Chemicals such as benzene can go right into the blood stream, she said.

The Louisiana Environmental Action Network and Tulane Environmental Law Clinic are planning two lawsuits and are fighting a third asking the state and federal governments to enforce laws, two speakers said.

The legal actions would limit industrial expansion and reduce air pollution emissions in the five-parish area of East and West Baton Rouge, Livingston, Ascension and Iberville, said Gary Miller, a chemical engineering consultant who helps the Louisiana Environmental Action Network.

State officials say the area is close to meeting the clean air standard for ozone.

Miller said the deadline to meet the standard passed in November, and "We should be getting kicked up from the serious ozone (designation) to severe" for failing to meet the standards. The state is trying to argue that two violations in Grosse Tete last summer should be dropped because of a malfunctioning analyzer. That would make the area eligible for a one-year extension to meet the standard.

Miller said ozone problem is hampering industrial expansion, but "Once the ozone problem is solved, we will not be able to keep these plants out."

Suzanne Dickey of the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic said the clinic and LEAN are trying to force government agencies to live within the law and are not just interested in filing lawsuits.

"We tried to negotiate with EPA, ... and they did not take us very seriously," Dickey said.

Dickey said there are six air standards, and the area meets five of the six (such as for particulate matter and for nitrogen oxides.)

The conference was sponsored in part by the Louisiana Clean Air Project and the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic, with funding from the Alton Jones Foundation and the McKnight Foundation.