Toxic air laws don’t ensure health

Air pollution laws in Louisiana and the rest of the nation are inadequate to ensure the health of either workers or the general populace, according to an internationally known toxicologist.

Almost all of those regulations were set without regard to cancer, says Dr. Victor Alexander, who headed occupational medicine at Ochsner Foundation Clinic until going into private practice last year. The regulations, instead, were based upon the ability of the chemical to cause immediate health problems.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations are extremely outdated in light of current information on long-term health effects of many chemicals, Alexander says.

The point may be moot since OSHA has not conducted a routine air inspection of a Louisiana chemical plant in several years.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also has dropped the ball in setting regulations on toxic materials, says Alexander.

EPA has only set regulations on six toxic air pollutants in the 12 years since it was instructed by Congress to tackle the problem. This is despite a long list of chlorinated hydrocarbons and other chemicals for which there is evidence of danger to public health.

Weighing risk, cost of future air laws

Too much remains unknown to try to set stringent regulations on the organics that many people call toxic air pollutants, says the man who heads an air pollution subcommittee for the Louisiana Chemical Association.

“We don’t know enough to spend millions of dollars in the petrochemical industry to correct a problem that may not be a problem,” says Bob Eisenbach of the LCA.

That’s especially true, he says, because the chemical industry is in financial jeopardy. Industry has spent a great deal on pollution control, says Eisenbach. Much of it has been to great advantage, but some of the money has been spent unnecessarily.

The chemical industry is not in a position to spend unnecessary money at this time, when it is undergoing financial hardship, he adds.

There is already overkill in the regulations, he says. More is not needed.

Before regulatory action is taken on organic air pollutants, he maintains that the effects of these pollutants must be determined.

“How many of them are really a problem? How big of a problem?”

He says the task will not be easy.

It’s not easy to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between a chemical pollutant and a health problem, he says. Once that is done, it is even harder to determine the degree of risk, he says.

Determination of risk is important, he says, because at some point, the costs of pollution control have a diminishing return.