Discharges of toxic chemicals to the air appear to pose the greatest risk of all environmental pollutants, DEQ Secretary Paul Templet told the Baton Rouge Press Club Monday.

“If water is polluted you can avoid it,” Templet said. “Air is ubiquitous. You can’t avoid air.”

Risk calculations indicate air is the biggest problem, Templet said.

Air pollutants are taken into the lungs, which are sensitive organs — more sensitive than the stomach, Templet said. Industry has reduced air pollutants, but not nearly by the magnitude it has reduced water discharges, he said.

A report released Monday by DEQ indicates Louisiana industry reduced water discharges by 80 percent, but air discharges by only 4 percent.

Templet predicted larger decreases of air pollutants as the state’s new toxic air pollutants act begins to have an impact over the next few years.

Although it won’t show up in those figures, Templet said DEQ also hopes to reduce the air pollutants from vehicles in areas like Baton Rouge, which have smog problems.

The state is considering a more stringent vehicle emissions inspection program in areas with smog problems. If a car doesn’t pass the test, the owner would have to spend up to $75 trying to correct the problem.

“A tune-up sometimes is all you need,” Templet said.

Templet said a task force of industry, government and environmental representatives is working to reduce the smog or ozone problem in Baton Rouge. Smog is formed by nitrogen oxides and hydrocarbons from industry, natural vehicles and other sources.

There are some things that can be done by next summer to avoid having another period of four straight days of unhealthful air, the DEQ secretary said.
Templet told the Press Club that two years ago he had pointed out the state's environmental problems when he spoke at its meeting and this time he could show progress in dealing with some of those problems.

Enforcement and penalties to environmental violators have risen dramatically, he said. Funding for the department also has gone up.

DEQ has written stronger regulations to protect the state's water and to reduce the discharges of radioactive wastes in the state's oilfields.

The agency is following the lead of Europe in requiring continuous monitoring on discharges by industries along the Mississippi and Calcasieu rivers, he said.

Now there can be a quick warning to alert people to a problem rather than information that comes after it is too late to deal with the problem.

DEQ also has pushed recycling and will have 250,000 households participating in recycling programs when Baton Rouge expands its pilot program this year, he said.

DEQ has called in the state's top emitters of toxic pollutants and received plans from them that will reduce the state's toxic discharges by 40 percent over the next few years, he said.

Another important action has been linking industrial tax exemptions to good environmental records, which will provide an incentive for companies not to pollute and more money to the coffers of local government when firms fail to live up to the environmental standards.

Asked about his goals for 1991, Templet said to get a proper structure set up in the agency, "to last out the year," and "to get through the legislative session in two or three pieces."