Unhealthful air pollution level reached

By BOB ANDERSON
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Air pollution reached the unhealthful level in Baton Rouge again Monday.
The latest violation of federal air quality standards comes on the heels of recent air pollution incidents that have pushed Baton Rouge into a higher level on the federal non-compliance list, which means the state will have to come up with stringent new measures to battle pollution.

Some of those measures will affect motorists as well as industry.
The incident also follows the loss by the Baton Rouge area of a chance to get a $2.5 billion plastics plant because of the existing air pollution problem.

The latest violation of federal air quality standards comes on the heels of Dr. Floyd Roberts, a pulmonary specialist, had to increase medication pushed Baton Rouge into a higher level on several patients for no apparent reason other than the air pollution problem.

The physician said he has noticed the same trend in other periods of high ozone pollution.

An increase in asthmatic complaints, upper respiratory problems, eye irritation, and sinus problems have been reported by other local physicians during periods of high ozone concentrations here.

Other symptoms, according to EPA, are sore throat, nausea, and chest pain.

Animal studies indicate ozone interferes with the immune system and causes scar tissue in the lungs after repeated exposure, according to experts. It has also been linked to effects on blood enzymes, the endocrine system, the liver and the central nervous system.

Some studies have indicated the current standard of .12 ppm is not sufficient to protect public health, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is currently considering a more stringent standard.

Ozone also negatively affects tree growth and crop production, according to federal officials.

The severe ozone pollution in recent weeks will push the Baton Rouge area into a higher bracket on the federal non-attainment list when it comes out next year, according to McDaniel, meaning the state will have to take more stringent measures to reduce the air pollution problem.

A stronger emission inspection program on automobiles almost certainly will be one of the results, and use of ethanol by motorists during the spring and summer is another possibility, he said.

Industry is going to be required to cut

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back on pollutants, and the DEQ will begin concentrating on particular types of hydrocarbons that form the most ozone, he said.

Among those are ethylene and propylene, the top two toxics by volume emitted in Baton Rouge last year, according to the Baton Rouge Right-to-Know Council.

"I'm seeing a lot of interest in trying to solve the problem," McDaniel said in an interview Monday evening. Both the Chamber of Commerce and the Right-to-Know Council have offered help.

The most obvious economic cost so far has been the loss of an opportunity to get a $2.5 billion Formosa Plastics plant that was considering sites in the Baton Rouge area. That plant would have provided 2,000 jobs.

The area's failure to meet federal air quality standards made it difficult, if not impossible, for the company to get the needed air discharge permit.

The plant may locate in Texas or farther downriver in either St. John the Baptist Parish or St. Charles Parish.

A lot of foreign firms have been in the area looking for sites to open new plants, but the area's air pollution problem is a major negative factor, according to McDaniel.

The only way a plant can have a major expansion or a new plant that produces more than 100 tons a year in hydrocarbon emissions can get a permit in a non-attainment area is to obtain pollution reduction credits, known as "offsets," from an existing industry.

A plant obtains such credits when it closes a unit or reduces its emissions more than is required.

The non-attainment parishes in this area are East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Ascension, Iberville, Pointe Coupee, St. James and Livingston.