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Ozone pollution issue complex

Major natural factors toss EPA control strategy off course

By WILLIAM L. SENN

During 1988, the Baton Rouge area experienced 13 days in which EPA's ozone standard was exceeded. The previous year we had 11 such days. Ozone is among six air quality standards with which communities around the nation must comply. The seven parishes that form the Baton Rouge region are in compliance with five of the six EPA standards, but we remain out of compliance on ozone.

Why does ozone remain such a pervasive problem? Part of the reason is that unlike the other five pollutants, ozone is not directly emitted to the atmosphere. It is a secondary pollutant which is formed when nitrogen dioxide decomposes in sunlight. Nitrogen dioxide is formed when fossil fuel is burned in automobiles, electrical power plants and other industries. Through a series of complex chemical reactions in the atmosphere, hydrocarbons then act to further increase the level of ozone.

The hydrocarbons come from many sources such as automobile emissions, industrial emissions and from natural sources such as trees. The weather is also a factor. Most ozone exceedences occur on hot days with little air



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movement.

Over the past years, EPA's strategy for controlling ozone has been based on reducing hydrocarbons. In spite of an 82 percent reduction in hydrocarbons by Baton Rouge industries and the increasing use of emission control equipment on automobiles, limited improvement has been seen in our area. The strategy has failed in part because weather and natural hydrocarbon emissions, two of the major factors, cannot be controlled. The ozone problem is a complex technical issue in which many of the pieces of the puzzle are poorly understood.

The chemical and refining industry in the Baton Rouge area is very much concerned about the ozone problem and is continuing to take actions designed to bring our area into compliance. The most recent action is the formation of a joint industry/Department of Environmental Quality Ozone Task Force. Industry is volunteering its technical manpower, consultants and other resources to the effort to assist the Department of Environmental Quality.

One of the first tasks of the joint group will be to identify both the type and quantity of all the hydrocarbons being emitted in our area. That, along with nitrogen dioxide emission data, will form a data base which may help us understand why our previous

plans have failed. In addition, it will provide a basis for a new plan and allow the Department of Environmental Quality to evaluate alternatives such as further cuts in industry emissions, tighter controls on automobile emissions and possible nitrogen dioxide reduction.

Louisiana has had previous plans for bringing us into compliance with ozone standards. While these have helped reduce the problem, they haven't eliminated it. A significant difference between the previous plans and the one being developed is the level of cooperation between industry and state government. Much of this cooperation is due to the efforts of the DEQ Secretary Dr. Paul Templet and his staff and a chemical industry which is accepting its responsibilities and providing leadership in environmental matters.

Ozone is only one of a number of environmental problems which must be resolved in Louisiana. We believe the remaining problems will be best resolved by a close and cooperative working relationship between environmental regulators, citizens, municipalities, industries and other responsible parties.

Editor's note: William L. Senn is manager of the Exxon Chemicals plant in Baton Rouge. He is a spokesman for the Baton Rouge Right-to-Know Council, a group formed by 13 area chemical companies and refineries for the purpose of establishing a public dialogue concerning environmental issues.

