

all accounts, Louisiana has billions of pounds of hazardous waste in hundreds of buried pits and isolated lagoons across the state, waiting to be cleaned up. Yet only 11 sites have been named to the federal Superfund list that includes 1,189 of the nation's worst hazardous waste dumps.

State officials and scientists give several explanations for the apparent disparity: early state incompetence in identifying potential sites; a federal scoring system for Superfund sites that discriminates against Louisiana's population patterns; and a grave miscalculation about the ability of the state's soils to contain the wastes.

Superfund provides federal money to clean up waste sites that pose the greatest threats to health and the environment - only a small fraction of the total number of sites nationwide. The states must clean up the rest themselves, or get the responsible companies to pay.

When the Superfund program began in 1980, officials concede Louisiana was slow to seek federal cleanup money.

"We used to say there weren't any hazardous waste sites in this state, so when Superfund came along, New Jersey got all the money," said Ed Overton, director of the Institute for Environmental Studies at Louisiana State University. "It turns out we have them. We just didn't look."

In addition, the complicated Superfund score sheets gave more points - and most of the federal money - to sites in highly populated areas.

In Louisiana, sites are usually in sparsely populated areas, so each one threatens fewer people, making it difficult to qualify for federal money. But Louisiana has so many more sites than most states that thousands of residents face potential health threats. They just don't all live in one place.

"We used to say you could kill a couple of people and not get on the list, but give a thousand people a rash and you'd make it," said Harold Etheridge, who supervises state cleanup of abandoned waste sites.

Finally, the Superfund scoring system always has treated threats to drinking water as important. But Louisiana's sites always scored low because the state's clay-laden soils were considered ideal for keeping hazardous wastes out of groundwater.

More recent research has shown that conclusion to be seriously flawed, and, state officials say, Louisiana now has the contaminated groundwater to prove it.

The scoring system is being revamped.

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Illustration:

An open pit awaits cleanup at the Petro Processors hazardous waste site north of Baton Rouge. Experts believe it may be 500 years or more before the site is clean. [COLOR]

STAFF PHOTO BY G. ANDREW BOYD