THE CHEMICAL INDUSTRY'S TOXIC TOLL: LA. PAYS FOR - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - February 17, 1991 - page A1
February 17, 1991 | Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) | JAMES O'BYRNE and MARK SCHLEIFSTEIN Staff writers | Page A1

Felix "Pappy" LeBouef had heard about as much as he could stand. A community organizer had come before the School Board to complain about pollution from the booming chemical industry in St. John the Baptist Parish, and LeBouef, a board member, cut off the criticism.

"You either starve to death from no water and no food, or you die from chemicals," LeBouef said, verbalizing an article of faith about life in Louisiana's chemical corridor. "You've got a choice to make."

LeBouef's position - that environmental damage is the price that must be paid for the economic benefits of the chemical industry - has been expressed over and over by state legislators and lobbyists, police jurors and parish councilmen across the state.

But under any reasonable scrutiny, it is wrong.

The chemical industry, with its high-paying jobs and the tremendous cash value of its products, ranks second only to the oil and gas industry as a driving force in the state's economy. Louisiana is one of the nation's mightiest manufacturers of industrial chemicals.

But the state is also the nation's second leading toxic polluter, a status evident in miles of befouled rivers and streams, in air thick with a chemical soup, in communities living in daily fear of cancer and other diseases, in toxic waste sites and contaminated groundwater. For blindly accepting the notion that chemical industry jobs and environmental damage were a package deal, Louisiana has paid dearly.

For example:

* Petrochemical plants, and to a lesser extent petroleum refineries, have wreaked havoc on the state's underground water supplies. Across the state, 54 industrial sites have contaminated groundwater. In some cases, the problem is so serious municipal drinking water sources are threatened. Yet state environmental officials have done little to address the problem, even though three-fourths of the state's residents rely on underground aquifers for drinking water.

* Louisiana industries discharged 130 million pounds of toxic chemicals into the air, ranking the state fourth in the nation in 1988, the latest year for which comprehensive figures are available. The amount includes millions of pounds of substances known or suspected to cause cancer. The vast majority of the discharges came from chemical plants.

The state ranked fourth in the nation in toxic air pollution from industry, according to federal statistics compiled from industry self-reporting. Ascension Parish, home to the massive Geismar-St. Gabriel petrochemical complex, had the second highest toxic air discharges of any parish or county in the nation.

* Louisiana discharged more toxic chemicals into surface waters - 157 million pounds - than any other state in 1988. The state's toxic water discharges that year accounted for 43 percent of all the toxic water pollution in the country.

Strict new water discharge standards were approved by the Legislature in 1989. The state's chemical industry has sued to overturn the rules, and a trial is pending.

*** A chemical analysis ***

An analysis of the chemical industry, including visits to 17 plants across the state, reveals that reductions of millions of pounds of toxic discharges have taken place at some plants without the loss of a single job, and usually with technology that has long been available. In many cases, jobs have been created in the form of additional construction and maintenance functions.

The state's residents and politicians in recent years have become increasingly aware of the dangers of pollution. Yet by every outside measure, Louisiana is still not spending enough money or changing its policies and regulations quickly enough to make a difference.

In 1988, while Louisiana trailed only Texas in toxic discharges, the state ranked 48th in the effectiveness of the political system and state policies at addressing the problems, said the Institute for Southern Studies, a non-profit research group in North Carolina. Another group ranked the state's programs 50th.

"We're at the bottom in regulations and at the top in toxic discharges," said Paul Templet, who heads the state Department of Environmental Quality. "That's a combination for disaster."

And while some plants work to reduce emissions, the industry as a whole continues to play hardball, challenging nearly every fine or penalty assessed against it, stalling new regulations in court, seeking legislation to allow for more delay and warning that the next new regulation will force closures and layoffs across the state.

"Nothing we've asked them to do so far has hurt them," Templet said. "They're still here, and they're all making a lot of money. They're having to spend some of that money now on pollution controls. But that's the way it ought to be."

*** World-class operations ***

The state's petrochemical complexes are world class. A plant site vibrates with the power of screaming turbines, spinning pumps and high-pressure boilers, pounding, burning and blasting crude oil into the plastics, drugs, cosmetics, fibers, tires and myriad other products that pervade modern life.

A typical plant includes thousands of valves, flanges, bolts, vents and connections amid a stainless steel spaghetti of pipes. Immense storage tanks surround the plants, with some feeding their thirst and others harboring the products that come out. Some processing equipment runs day and night, sometimes for two or three years at a stretch without shutting down.

The potential for problems is nearly endless.

Consider the environmental impact of just one plant, PPG Industries in Lake Charles. PPG has operated the plant since 1947. Sprawled on the banks of the Calcasieu River, it is bigger than many, smaller than some.

Today:

* The Calcasieu River is posted with advisories against eating trout and certain other fish caught there because toxic hexachlorobenzene and hexachlorobutadiene have been pouring out of PPG's plant for years. The chemicals have built up in the flesh of the fish to the point that health officials are no longer sure the fish are safe to eat.

* The company has a huge groundwater contamination problem from an old toxic waste dump that officials do not expect will be cleaned up in their lifetimes.

* Poisonous organic chemicals that leaked from a tank farm for several years have seeped into the Chicot Aquifer, the underground drinking water source for Lake Charles.

* Sediments in the Calcasieu River adjacent to the plant are heavily contaminated with toxic chemicals.

* Sediments in two bayous leading to the river also are laced with chemicals, and the Environmental Protection Agency says the contamination is severe enough to threaten human health and marine life. Some of the sediment is considered a hazardous waste.

* The company discharged 2 million pounds of toxic chemicals into the air in 1989, and 407,000 pounds into the water. That does not include about 2 pounds per day of poisonous hex compounds that continue to pour into the Calcasieu River as a result of runoff from the old toxic dump site.

Because of their size, the scale of operations and the products they handle and manufacture, chemical plants will always be sources for toxic emissions.

*** Resources are right ***

Louisiana has long been a compelling site for chemical plants because of an abundant and cheap supply of oil and gas, which serve as the raw materials for most chemicals, and large tracts of open land next to major rivers, which provide both the vast quantities of water needed for chemical manufacturing and vital transportation routes for the industry's products.

The state's largest concentration of chemical plants marches in an almost unbroken line along the Mississippi River from the Exxon Chemical Co. plant near Baton Rouge to Chevron Chemicals in Plaquemines Parish. Another major complex has grown up in Lake Charles along the Calcasieu River.

Sprinkled among the plants are some of the nation's largest oil refineries - such as Exxon in Baton Rouge, Citgo in Lake Charles, Marathon in St. John the Baptist Parish and BP in lower Plaquemines Parish. But individual plants are scattered across the state, even in rural areas such as Webster Parish in the state's northwestern corner, and Morehouse Parish north of Monroe.

The chemical industry employed 29,200 people in 1990 at 231 plant sites. For each one of those jobs, economists estimate eight more jobs are created in the economy.

*** An effort is made ***

Most plants have begun concerted efforts to reduce their emissions. But it is clear that recent reductions could have been realized years ago if regulators had forced them to occur, or if the plants had wanted them to. Most plants didn't seem interested in looking at their discharges until a new federal law forced them to in 1987.

Under that law, the Community Right to Know Act, plants are now required to calculate their emissions of toxic chemicals into the air, the water and the land, and report those numbers to the federal government, which makes them public.

"It shocked a lot of the industry folks, the magnitude of these releases," said Dan Borne, president of the Louisiana Chemical Association, on the 1987 emissions data. "It really hit home. People from boardrooms all the way down to plants recognized they had to get aggressive to try to find ways to reduce these emissions."

Plant officials concede, though, that pollution control projects beyond those required by state and federal regulations are sometimes difficult to get approved by corporate headquarters because they add nothing to production, and thus do not contribute to profits.

For example, huge tanks that store thousands of gallons of toxic feedstock chemicals and products are exempt from stringent safety requirements that apply to waste tanks - although wastes are usually just diluted and impure versions of the more toxic feedstocks and products. Leaks and cracks in feedstock and product tanks have caused contamination of underground water supplies at several sites.

But chemical plant maintenance and construction practices show little concern at most sites for the potential dangers of storage tanks. Some plants don't regularly inspect all of their product tanks, and only a few have considered reconstructing the tanks to meet the more stringent waste standards.

"It's a lot cheaper for industry to hire lobbyists and attorneys to take us to court," Templet said, "than it is for them to put in the pollution-control equipment."

Illustration:

The state Capitol stands a stone's throw away from petrochemical plants. State industries release 482 million pounds of toxins a year. [COLOR]

STAFF PHOTO BY G.ANDREW BOYD

The Mississippi River, home to more than 100 chemical plants from Baton Rouge to Belle Chasse, provides the vast quantities of water and the transportation routes vital to the industry. Here ships pass the American Cyanamid plant in Jefferson Parish, the single largest polluting plant in the state in 1989.

STAFF PHOTO BY G. ANDREW BOYD