



DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

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DEQ reassures residents concerning air toxics rumors

BATON ROUGE –Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality officials are reassuring state residents that there are no toxic hot spots concerning air quality near any schools, or anywhere else, in the state despite a national publication that could be misread to say otherwise. The USA Today used a screening tool to make assumptions on air quality at schools across the nation. The article could be misinterpreted to be a risk assessment or to reach the conclusion that some schoolchildren are breathing toxic air.

However, the USA Today used a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency *screening* tool to come up with its rankings. Under the question-and-answer portion of its Web site, the USA Today states: “Experts say the model is meant as ‘a screening tool. It isn’t an in-depth analysis,’ says Nick Bouwes, who helped create the model for EPA. That means you should take what the model says and ask more questions. Its purpose is to compare one location against another to determine which one might indicate more pollution problems.”

The EPA says the model can provide a detailed assessment of where industrial emissions go, but it is not perfect. The model relies on assumptions like how tall smokestacks are, topography and which way the wind blows. The data USA Today used is from the 2005 Toxic Release Inventory, or TRI, which requires certain companies to report environmental releases and transfers of toxic chemicals. These releases are not always air releases. Many releases are water discharges, injections into soil or other methods of permitted and environmentally sound disposal. The USA Today report did not differentiate between the types of releases for these chemicals. This could be why USA Today lists Huntsman Petrochemical in Florida as a contributor to air pollution at several area Baton Rouge schools, when clearly it is not.

The Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality collects air toxics data from 21 air monitors throughout the state. These monitors have accurate data that shows the state meets all state air toxic standards. In 1991, Louisiana was one of the first states to institute a Toxic Air Pollutant Program. The state monitors for more than 60 air toxics and tracks toxic air emissions from more than 250 industrial facilities. Within the past week, the department took grab samples near Istrouma High School and Wyandotte Early Childhood Center in Baton Rouge. These one-time samples showed that the air was safe for human health and the environment at both locations. A full report should be available on Monday.

“The state has real data, not extrapolated data, from an in-depth air-monitoring system that shows the air quality in Louisiana meets stringent air toxics standards that are protective of human health and the environment,” said DEQ Secretary Harold Leggett. “Our goal is to protect all people in all communities and we have a monitoring network to provide information on air quality. If we see the potential for a hot spot or a problem area, we have tools to conduct more in-depth analysis of these areas, and we’ve conducted these kinds of studies in the past. We have state-of-the art technology like our Mobile Air Monitoring Lab and infrared camera that we have used and will continue to use to ensure the safety of all Louisiana residents. DEQ has one of the most advanced air toxics monitoring networks in the country and our conclusions are based on accurate data and real science.”

Since the air toxics program was instituted, the state has benefited from more than 93 million pounds of annual reductions in air toxic releases. This amounts to a nearly 65 percent decrease from 1990. A couple of examples are the 58 percent decrease in benzene and the 83 percent decrease in hydrogen sulfide.

As mandated by the law, DEQ developed and promulgated the Comprehensive Toxic Air Pollutant Emission Control regulation, one of the most stringent state air toxics rules in the country. The state regulation also surpasses the federal regulation. In addition to incorporating the control technology, known as MACT standards, the state rule establishes emission reporting requirements for all major sources of toxic air pollutants and sets ambient air standards. The state list of regulated chemicals includes the federal toxic air pollutants and adds others which are of particular concern in Louisiana, such as ammonia and hydrogen sulfide.