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SATURDAY State-Times/Morning Advocate (Baton Rouge, LA.)

November 11, 2000, Saturday METRO EDITION

SECTION: News; Pg. 2-B;S

LENGTH: 746 words

HEADLINE: Chemist helps La. communities monitor polluters

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BODY:

Communities can use pollution data disclosed by industry to make environmental regulators do a better job and to push companies into reducing toxic emissions, New Iberia chemist Wilma Subra said Friday.

For example, Subra said she and the residents of Norco "have been able to convince Shell to reduce their toxic releases by 30 percent in three years." Shell has also taken action to reduce its accidental releases by 50 percent in the same amount of time, she said.

"We are impacting national policy and regulatory efforts," Subra said in an address to LSU students and faculty sponsored by Department of Chemical Engineering.

Subra focused much of her talk on Calcasieu Parish, where she helped residents get the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Quality to do more monitoring and enforcement.

She usually starts with the Toxic Release Inventory, an annual list of what industries report having released into the air and water. It includes more than 300 toxic chemicals.

She showed 1998 numbers for Citgo Petroleum, which recently reported 1.792 million pounds of fugitive emissions, or leaks from valves and pipe connections. Stack emissions amounted to 320,260, making the total emissions to 2.113 million pounds in 1998.

Subra said she used such huge fugitive emission numbers to push regional EPA officials to look at the leaks and ask industry to control them better.

While industry and government report air quality is getting better, many companies had increases in emissions, she said.

Looking over a table of other self-reported industrial pollution in Calcasieu, she asked: "Is this the kind of community you'd like to live in?" Subra says she lists the chemicals from nearby facilities and classifies them in terms of known and perceived health risks so residents can understand the potential threat.

She also uses the results of state monitoring. She said the Westlake monitor showed that air contained more 1,2-dichloroethane than allowed by law.

"DEQ's own ambient air station shows it exceeded the criteria," she said.

And until community groups pushed, DEQ was doing nothing, she said.

She and community activists convinced EPA to do some additional monitoring last year and, eventually, to use a special mobile monitor to check Lake Charles.

The first effort found high levels of toluene and twice the allowable levels of sulfur dioxide. Another map of monitoring data showed 3.1 parts per billion of benzene, a known human carcinogen, in the wind blowing into a styrene and ethylene production facility, and 7.4 parts per billion as it drifted off of the industrial area. EPA investigated and found violations, she said.

She said the special mobile lab confirmed what citizens had been saying - there were toxic chemicals above the allowable levels in the community.

Residents also have been doing their own monitoring.

Armed with home-made sampling devices made from plastic buckets and chemical sampling bags, a group took one sample that showed 870 parts per billion of benzene.

This February, the "**bucket brigades**" found high levels of vinyl chloride and 1,2-dichloroethane. Subra compared that finding with accidental releases reported to Calcasieu Parish emergency response officials and found matches.

One company, in a two-minute accident, reported releasing nearly the same amount of one chemical as it reported releasing the whole previous year, Subra said.

Using industry-supplied impact maps for accident scenarios - documents which are no longer available to the public - Subra showed accidents can have a wide impact.

"There is a real need for a buffer zone" she said.

Shell Chemical in Norco has agreed to buy out two streets of homes in that community.

"We want buffer zones. Are we appropriate in asking for buffer zones? Based on their own impact (scenarios), yes," she said.

State law requires greater buffers for video poker and gambling casinos than for industrial facilities, she said.

Subra was one of the 1999 winners of a John D. and Catherine MacArthur Fellowship,

often called "genius grants." She received a \$375,000, no-strings-attached grant that she uses to continue her work.

She operates The Subra Co. chemical lab in New Iberia. She received bachelor's and master's degrees in chemistry from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette.

Subra also serves on a special advisory committee to EPA Administrator Carol Browner.

LOAD-DATE: November 13, 2000