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State continues to trim level of toxic releases That's in contrast to national trend of rising totals

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By Mark Schleifstein
Staff writer

Following a 16-year trend, Louisiana registered a slight reduction in the release of toxic chemicals to the environment in 2002, according to figures released Wednesday by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Industries in the state released 126.8 million pounds of chemicals and mining wastes to the land, air or water, or disposed of it underground or in off-site facilities in 2002, according to the Toxic Release Inventory. That compares to 128 million pounds in 2001.

Companies report their own estimates of toxic releases to the EPA, a system that has drawn the criticism of several state and national environmental groups.

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On Tuesday, the Environmental Integrity Project and the Louisiana Bucket Brigade released a report that estimated that Louisiana industries released 74 percent more of 10 chemicals that are constituents of ground-level ozone than they reported on their Toxic Release Inventory forms in 2001.

Kelly Haragan, a lawyer representing the project, said the estimates were based on studies conducted by Texas state environmental officials in the Houston area after ozone levels there did not seem to match the numbers reported by industry for the chemicals that form ozone.

Louisiana embarked on a similar check, still under way, of ozone-related chemical reporting by industries in the Baton Rouge area last year after ozone levels there rose dramatically.

EPA officials said their checks of the quality of data has been limited to identifying unusual trends when comparing data submitted by industries from year to year.

Mike Flynn, program director for the inventory, said Tuesday that the agency has notified "hundreds of facilities" during the past year that they violated rules requiring that data be submitted by July 1, levying a number of fines. Information received after that date is unavailable for inclusion in that year's inventory, he said.

Officials could not say whether any Louisiana companies missed the deadline.

Louisiana's falling numbers are in contrast to the national totals. Nationwide, industries reported releasing 4.79 billion pounds of toxic chemicals in 2002, an increase of 5 percent from the prior year.

The Louisiana Chemical Association, which represents many of the state's major chemical producers, said its members have reduced releases of chemicals to the air by 80 million pounds, or 70 percent, since the first year of

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the inventory in 1987. Water releases declined by 152.4 million pounds, or 96 percent, and the disposal of chemicals on-site, including in underground injection wells, dropped 377 million pounds, or 91 percent.

However, the association's 111 member facilities actually registered a 3.1 percent, or 2.2 million pound, increase, said spokeswoman Tia Edwards, largely the result of a fluctuating demand for chemical products. The association's members include about a third of the state's chemical plants, but most of the largest chemical facilities.

"To have one increase in TRI emissions in 16 years is consistent with a conscientious environmental policy," she said.

Edwards called the allegations that industries underreport their chemicals "outlandish claims."

"Member companies are required by state and federal agencies and authorities to comply with all rules and regulations governing TRI emissions reporting," she said. "Our people can go to jail for falsifying reports."

Mary Lee Orr, director of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, which represents dozens of local environmental groups across the state, said the annual release of the data helps the public understand what chemicals may pose a threat to their communities.


"TRI shows that there is an unacceptable amount of toxic discharges to the area commonly known as the 'Louisiana chemical corridor,'" she said. "We need to work to reduce the amount of chemicals that negatively impact our health, quality of life and our economic future."

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EPA's toxic release data is available to the public through its TRI Explorer Web site, which allows searches by parish or ZIP code, at www.epa.gov/triexplorer.

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