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LOUISIANA

EPA finds air-pollution efforts lacking

DEQ says it's working to address concerns

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BATON ROUGE — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found a number of “serious concerns” with the state’s oversight of programs to monitor and control air pollution, according to a report compiled by the federal agency over the summer.

The review, recently obtained by state environmental groups, identified eight problems with the program aimed at keeping the state in compliance with the federal Clean Air Act, including criticism for delays in the issuance of permits, the number of staff working on the program and collection of fees from companies.

The document says that the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, or DEQ, has pledged to fix all of these problems, noting that the federal government can take away the

state agency’s authority over air pollution if deadlines are not met.

“These are all issues that are being worked out,” said Michael Vince, DEQ’s administrator for the permits division. He said the state is meeting all the deadlines set by the Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, to improve various aspects of its air and water programs.

Earlier this year, the EPA took issue with the management of the state’s water pollution enforcement program, instructing the DEQ to more forcefully crack down on polluters. Environmental groups have requested that the federal government remove state control of programs watching over air pollution, water pollution and hazardous waste.

Environmentalists applauded the EPA review, saying it validates their concerns about DEQ’s practices. “EPA took a bold and real look at the Title V (air program) at DEQ and found again that DEQ is not fulfilling its responsibility,” said Mary Lee Orr, executive director of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network.

But Anne Rolfes, the founding director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, local groups that monitor air pollution, questioned why environmental organizations that initiated complaints about the state agency to the EPA had not been included in the discussion about changing the department. Vince said that federal officials have been working with the state agency on its review of the air pollution program since spring.

In the report, the EPA notes that comparable states have at least 30 staff people to write air pollution permits, while the DEQ has only 15 full-time staffers. The state agency has agreed to review its staffing needs and submit a plan by the beginning of December.

In the past couple of years, the DEQ has lost 14 permit-writer positions, Vince said, adding that the agency is looking into whether it needs to add staff. DEQ has enough money from air permit fees to pay for additional workers, if permission is obtained from the Legislature, he said.

The EPA found that the state

has a backlog of both initial and renewal Title V permits, which are more comprehensive air permits created under the Clean Air Act in the mid-1990s. The state has systematically been working through issuing these permits for more than a thousand facilities in the state since the law was implemented, Vince said.

DEQ has submitted a plan to the federal agency to address this logjam, saying the department will issue all the initial permits by the summer of 2006.

Another issue raised by the EPA is about the collection of fees from companies that pay for the Title V air program. The federal agency found that the state agency doesn’t have a system that can account for all of the fees and is not able to ensure that the revenues collected are enough to cover the costs of the program. DEQ has agreed to complete a review of the costs of administering the program.

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