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HEADLINE: Activists protest Breaux's pollution stance

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BODY:

Environmental activists demonstrated outside U.S. Sen. John Breaux's Baton Rouge office Friday, claiming the powerful Democrat supports loosening rules on industrial **air** pollution.

Breaux wants Bush to ease **air** pollution permit rules on refineries and power plants, the protesters claim. Bush is considering the change so power companies can beef up energy output to meet demand.

Environmentalists said Friday that Breaux has turned his back on people who live near plants and refineries. Scaling back pollution permit rules will worsen their health, especially in industrial cities like Baton Rouge.

"We're saying don't roll back the Clean Air Act," said Peter Altman, an Austin, Texas, environmental activist who helped organize the protest Friday. "Make the polluters follow the rules."

Breaux issued a one-sentence statement in response to the protest. It reaffirms his desire to reconsider pollution permit policy.

"It's only fair to ask the EPA to determine the costs and benefits of new clean air regulations before we ask Louisiana to spend millions of dollars each year to comply with more federal regulations," Breaux said.

A spokesperson for the senator declined to respond to the protester's specific claims.

A week ago, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency held a public hearing in Baton Rouge to gather public sentiment on the issue. EPA top brass will make a recommendation to Bush on Aug. 17 on whether he should ease air pollution permit rules.

After Friday's brief rally of a dozen or so activists from Texas and Louisiana, Altman gave a Breaux staff member an enlarged photocopy of a letter the senator wrote to Bush

last Spring urging for a revamp of pollution permit rules. Stuck to the giant copy were pieces of paper with names of people who oppose changing the permit rules.

Breaux's March 23 letter, co-written by U.S. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., suggested regulators were too aggressive under President Clinton in enforcing parts of the Clean Air Act.

"I hope he (Breaux) sends a prompt retraction of this letter and spends some time in these refinery communities," Altman said.

The 1977 Clean Air Act requires refineries and plants that upgrade and increase air pollution to apply for new permits. Regulators then review the proposed new sources of pollution, and often require the company to install pollution control equipment.

Under Clinton, regulators decided companies had been skirting the rules. They launched a massive investigation and filed suit against several companies. Some of the companies settled out of court and paid fines, while a few have held out, including Exxon MobilCorp, which operates ExxonMobil refinery in Baton Rouge.

The Bush administration's review of permit policy has frozen those investigations. Environmentalists said they fear those companies will be let off the hook.

Exxon officials last week said the permit rules must be reviewed because they prevent refineries from expanding to meet market demands. Also, officials said Clinton unjustly changed how the rules were interpreted.

Anne Rolfes, a member of Louisiana **Bucket Brigade** which represents people living in industrial areas, said she believes "big oil" has won Breaux over.

When security guards turned away the protesters at the building where Breaux's Baton Rouge office is located, she called out, "If we were big oil with a briefcase full of money, would you let us in then?"

GRAPHIC: Photo of: Anne Rolfes and Maura Wood working with some signs (by Richard Alan Hannon)

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