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HEADLINE: Environmentalists **air** concerns about refineries;
Protesters urge Bush to support controls

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BODY:

Citing the negative effects of oil refinery pollution on public health and quality of life, environmentalists Friday called on the Bush administration to abandon a proposal they say could weaken the Clean **Air** Act.

The activists, winding down a three-day Gulf Coast "gasoline alley refinery victims tour" in New Sarpy, plan to meet with congressional officials in Washington early next week.

The Capitol Hill visit comes as the Bush administration reviews a key regulation at the center of a recent federal enforcement drive targeting oil refineries and power plants. The regulation, known as "new source review," requires plants to install pollution-control equipment when they expand.

Federal environmental regulators say oil refineries failed to add required equipment when they increased gasoline production in the past two decades. The oil industry says the Environmental Protection Agency changed its permitting requirements.

The activists began their three-day bus tour in Houston, visited Mossville and, while en route to New Sarpy, protested outside the Baton Rouge office of U.S. Sen. John Breaux, D-La., because of his support of the oil industry position. Their gathering Friday was near the Orion refinery in Norco, at the home of Dorothy Jenkins, who complains of having to stick her head in the refrigerator to get clean air. The Norco plant was the site of a fire in June after a gasoline tank was hit by lightning during Tropical Storm Allison.

On Friday, activists said the resolution of the debate could lead to more pollution from refineries, which they claim causes a variety of public health problems, including cancer and shortness of breath. "What happens when you increase your production is you increase your pollution," said Anne Rolfes, a coordinator for the Louisiana **Bucket Brigade**, a nonprofit environmental group. "The pollution has to go somewhere, and, unfortunately, it goes here -- where people live."

While oil refiners release millions of pounds of pollution that is regulated because of

health effects, "there is very little documented evidence directly linking refinery emissions to the next-door impacts," said Peter Altman, executive director of the SEED Coalition, a Texas environmental group.

Florence Robinson, an assistant professor of biology at Southern University, said she sees similar afflictions in communities near refinery fence lines. She said government studies on pollution effects are "riddled with errors."

Larry Wall, a spokesman for the Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association, said he doesn't doubt that some people are getting sick, but he questions whether refineries are to blame. He said refineries and chemical plants are a convenient target of criticism.

"I believe the refineries are operating in an environmentally safe manner," Wall said. "If these allegations are ever proven, I'm sure the industry will respond in an appropriate manner."

The environmental tour comes on the heels of a hearing last week in Baton Rouge to gather public comments on the new source review. Bush's energy plan directs the EPA to report by Aug. 17 on "the impact of the regulations on investment in new utility and refinery generation capacity, energy efficiency and environmental protection."

That hearing was dominated by environmentalists from Louisiana and other Southern states.

Top EPA officials say the public comments are essential to crafting any change. On Thursday, EPA administrator Christie Whitman told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee that the Bush administration is considering a variety of changes to "simplify the existing regulatory structure" concerning air pollution from power plants. The possible changes, which include pollution credit trading, mean that the new source review "could potentially be no longer necessary," Whitman said.

Whitman's comments were praised by the oil industry but criticized by environmentalists.

Altman of the Texas environmental group, said Whitman's comments raised questions about whether the public hearing process is a "dog and pony show." He said Bush used such diversionary tactics to loosen environmental regulations when he was governor of Texas.

But Rob Brenner, the acting assistant administrator for air and radiation at the Environmental Protection Agency, said Whitman's comments centered on a preliminary proposal that would be implemented only if further study determined that it would reduce more pollution than the new source review regulation. He said Whitman's comments concerned only the power industry, not refineries. Last week's public hearings were "real," Brenner said, and the Environmental Protection Agency continues to scrutinize public comments before reaching any conclusions on the new source review.

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GRAPHIC: STAFF PHOTO BY RIC FRANCIS Thirty community activists who live near oil refineries protest Friday in front of One Shell Square on Poydras Street in New Orleans. They are participants in a 'gasoline alley refinery victims tour' this week, which has stopped in Houston, Beaumont, Mossville, Norco, New Sarpy, Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The tour will conclude in Washington, D.C. **STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE** Tia'Vonna Wells, 4, watches a rally Friday in New Sarpy from her yard. Community activists held a news conference and released a report, 'Home Invasion,' highlighting Louisiana refinery expansions and the effect on nearby neighborhoods.

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