

24-hour monitoring for ExxonMobil toxins

By Jan Clifford
Contributing Writer

In the fertile countryside just a few miles from urban New Orleans, breezes from the Mississippi River waft over neatly clipped lawns and carefully maintained cottages in a modest residential subdivision of Chalmette. The same breezes blow over the ExxonMobil refinery, where community members say they gather carcinogenic poisons such as toluene, benzene and xylene, and carry them right into the emissions.

LABB and SBCEQ want ExxonMobil to hire a neutral third party to monitor emissions, and to take action to reduce toxins. They say that the open air monitor technology is affordable and accessible, and that the oil refinery's own monitors, and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) monitors are placed at a distance inappropriate for effectively measuring emission effects on the neighborhood.

"It's like a policeman monitoring St. Bernard Highway for speeding while parked miles away and pointing his radar in another direction," said Anne Rolfes, founder and Director of LABB, referring to the placement of both ExxonMobil's and the DEQ monitors. "We believe that if they look at it in the right spirit they could monitor their own emissions and keep their chemicals and sell them," Rolfes said.

Ken Ford, President of SBCEQ, is spearheading community efforts to hold ExxonMobil accountable for toxin releases. His backyard, just across the highway from the refinery, is the site of the monitoring station. It is also just a few yards away from the recess area of C.W. Rowley Middle School. Ford is concerned that children playing on days with high toxin release are at risk for reproductive and developmental diseases, the kind caused by chemicals that have already registered on the LABB open-air monitor.

The UV Sentry Open Path Air Monitor looks like a toolbox on a tripod, and is monitored by LABB staff. Ultra violet light picks up pol-

schoolyards and backyards of the 9,000 people in the neighborhood.

On Thursday, April 21, at 10 a.m., State Representative Ken Odinet, St. Bernard Citizens for Environmental Quality (SBCEQ) and the Louisiana Bucket Brigade (LABB) will hold a virtual ribbon-cutting ceremony for a real-time open-air monitor at 12 Carroll Drive. Installed by the LABB, the monitor will test and process air samples for six known carcinogenic toxins, 24 hours per day, with results available in real time on-line

at labucketbrigade.org. The monitor is the first of its kind in Louisiana.

The community members see themselves as a modern-day David in the shadow of a chemical Goliath. They have aligned efforts in order to spur ExxonMobil to accept responsibility for accurately monitoring its emissions and take steps to stem the "fugitive emissions" that they say have proven dangerous to the neighboring community. Fugitive emissions are chemical leaks due to faulty or aging equipment, in contrast to the refinery's self-monitored



This open-air monitor will test and process air for six known carcinogens 24 hours a day, giving Louisiana environmentalists a new weapon in the fight to clean up the air, land and water.

Photo by Nijme Rinaldi Nun

lutants — each has a chemical "thumbprint" — and the device also records wind speed and direction. After April 21, it will be possible to check the LABB Web site to know whether it is safe to go outside, or if neighbors should stay indoors.

Rolfes estimated that it would cost ExxonMobil a half million dollars to install monitors to protect the 2,000 students in three local schools and the 9,000 permanent residents. LABB is the only organization in the U.S. now actively using this technology, and Rolfes said that readings, measured in parts per billion, are geared to health standards

instead of accepted industry standards. The Open Air monitor costs around \$50,000.

Ford, said that incidences of deaths from brain cancer on his block are too numerous to be coincidental. He has lived in the neighborhood since 1962, and lost one of his lungs three years ago. Ford has pledged his home (as the site of the monitor) and his time to watchdogging the sprawling refinery less than five miles away. Ford said that the refinery's in-house release data is two years old, and access to that

Continued on Page 4, Sect. B

Monitoring ExxonMobil toxins

Continued from Page 9, Sect. A

that is arduous. "We're breathing in what they're breathing out, across the street," Ford said.

State Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) officials concurred that community complaints about ExxonMobil was a concern to their agency. According to Chris Roberie and Jim Hazlett, they are "trying to get a lease from the parish to put in monitors." The proposed monitors would be standard EPA protocol and would take a 24-hour sample every six days. Calls to the parish office were not returned.

"Air monitoring has been an issue throughout the state forever," Roberie said. "We like to think we've always been responsive to protecting the environment irregardless of the notions people have." Louisiana is one of three states in the U.S. that are required to take ambient air samples for lab analysis. Roberie said that since 1989, the required testing was a result of Louisiana's known tolerance of corporations that pollute the state's environment.

Roberie said that time needed to process lab tests prevented the DEQ from achieving a real-time record, and their tests checked for 100 pollutants. When asked if DEQ officials would monitor and cooperate with the LABB real-

time air testing station, Roberie said, "We'll probably take a look from time to time."

ExxonMobil is the world's biggest oil company, and the Chalmette refinery is in the top one-fifth of producers, processing 182,500 barrels per day, and employing 3,600 people. It also has a long and costly record of environmental violations.

On February 3, 2005, Judge Sarah Vance ruled that ExxonMobil has violated the Clean Air Act on at least 34 separate occasions from 1999-2004. Vance emphasized that repeated violations, even after Chalmette plaintiffs had filed suit, demonstrated that the refinery continued to be a "real threat" to the Clean Air Act. In April, an appeals court awarded more than \$100 million in damages in that same suit.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has named the refinery a High Priority Violator of the Clean Air Act for the past two years. The refinery has been legally cited on counts of releasing toxins, and failure to file timely Toxin Release Inventories. ExxonMobil's environmental record ranks in the worst 10 percent of refineries nationwide.

Local efforts to hold ExxonMobil responsible are complicated by public officials' attitudes toward the refinery's charitable community donations, said Rolfes. Some local officials refused to even approach the refinery management to help fund more Open Path monitors. One local school principal

stopped a teacher from using a smaller bucket monitor (on loan from LABB) to teach environmental science.

According to ExxonMobil's online corporate giving report, which posts 2003 figures, \$68,000 was given directly to the Chalmette community, while hundreds of thousands of dollars went to Baton Rouge and New Orleans art and civic organizations, and approximately \$28,540,600 in charitable donations was given in total within the U.S.

Last year, ExxonMobil posted profits of \$25.3 billion. Rolfes said that the Open Air monitor seed money came from a \$17,000 gift, and local contributions. ExxonMobil did not contribute to the project.

"Now is the time to invest in this technology," said Brian Swett, a former EPA employee who is donating his expertise to LABB. "They (ExxonMobil) claim to spend hundreds of thousands (of dollars) on monitoring, but where are the results?"

The Louisiana Bucket Brigade is a nonprofit environmental health and justice organization working with communities that neighbor the state's oil refineries and chemical plants. Their EPA-approved "bucket" is a simple tool that fence-line neighbors use to take air samples. The new Open Air monitor is a more sophisticated evolution of the bucket monitor.

ExxonMobil officials did not return calls for this article.◇