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Air quality awareness is topic of EPA, DEQ press event

BATON ROUGE -Today, representatives from the US Environmental Protection Agency and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality came together to raise awareness of the importance of air quality for people's health.

EPA Regional Administrator Ron Curry and DEQ Secretary Peggy Hatch spoke about ozone and its effects on air quality and people's health as part of Air Quality Awareness Month. Ozone levels usually rise with warmer temperatures, and higher levels can contribute to breathing problems such as increased asthma attacks.

Governor Bobby Jindal declared May as Air Quality Awareness Month to encourage Louisiana residents to learn more about ozone, how it forms, and how it can affect their health. May is also EPA's Asthma Awareness Month, which highlights the connection between air quality and people's health.

The Baton Rouge area has seen its air quality improve in recent years, due to the hard work and collaboration of local industries, governments, environmental groups and citizens, led by DEQ and EPA. Average ozone readings from 2011 to 2013 have allowed DEQ to begin working with EPA to designate the five-parish Baton Rouge area as attaining the health-based ozone standard.

"The data show that Louisiana's air quality continues to improve," said DEQ Secretary Peggy Hatch. "We can see that improvement in industry practices, a greater public awareness of ozone and the implementation of rules and regulations concerning air quality have made a difference. The efforts of many people have contributed to this accomplishment."

"The Baton Rouge area has made great strides in improving its air quality by working to reduce the harmful emissions that form ozone," said EPA Regional Administrator Ron Curry. "With one in ten American kids suffering from asthma, this benefits the health of Louisiana's families as well as the environment."

To continue the Baton Rouge area's success in reducing average ozone levels, the area is participating in EPA's Advance Program. This voluntary program gave Baton Rouge and other areas of the state's government, industry and citizen groups an opportunity to work with EPA and each other to reduce ozone-forming emissions. The Baton Rouge area has led the state in working with EPA air planning staff since June 2012 to identify ways to cut emissions and lower ozone levels.

Ozone is formed by the reaction of sunlight on air containing hydrocarbons (VOCs) and nitrogen oxides (NOx). VOCs and NOx are produced by mobile sources such as cars, boats and heavy construction equipment, industrial sources, natural sources and household activities such as using gas-powered lawn equipment and using paint thinners. High levels of ozone can affect lung function and irritate the respiratory system in sensitive populations like children and the elderly. It can worsen chronic health conditions like bronchitis, emphysema and asthma.