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High incidence seen in most polluted areas

Toxins a factor, some say; others say don't jump to conclusions

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Cancer casts its darkest shadow across Delaware's most heavily industrialized and traffic-choked neighborhoods.

While state officials cautioned against speculation about potential causes, each of the clusters identified in the state report to be released today was found in an area with clear environmental burdens, from industrial and farm pollution to jammed and smog-laced interstate highways to heavy reliance on shallow, private groundwater supplies that are vulnerable to contamination.

"I do not think the health department has been moving in the fastest way, but I'm glad to see this report come out," said John J. Austin Jr., a Rehoboth Beach area resident who led demands for an investigation into a Millsboro area cancer cluster last year.

Ann Tucker, a Hamilton Park resident who is part of a group now in court over industrial contamination escaping from industrial sites near the Port of Wilmington, suspects pollution may be causing some of the cancers.

"I'm sure that pollution has something to do with it," Tucker said. "It's been a problem in our community for a long time. I have a child care, and the state came out and put cement over part of my yard. They're saying now that it's not that bad, but we still have questions."

Others called for caution.

"The tendency among all Americans to point a finger at smokestacks is oftentimes just wrong," said John A. Hughes, secretary of Delaware's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control. "It's part of a larger picture, and the larger picture always includes lifestyle and home exposures."

DNREC and the Division of Public Health are exploring prospects for a study of Delaware residents' exposure to harmful compounds from a wide range of sources, Hughes said. He cautioned that the work, to be pursued through the state's Cancer Consortium, could be expensive and was unlikely to be approved this year.

"We want to make sure we're solving a cancer problem, not conducting an environmental crusade," Hughes said.

Researchers found the smallest area they examined, Kenton in Kent County, had the highest incidence of cancer in general, 22.5 percent above average.

Only one major, active pollution source, Dow Reichhold Specialty Latex, stands near Kenton. But that factory released enough of one carcinogenic compound in 1996, 1-3 butadiene, to put Kent County among the nation's worst sources for that chemical.

Emissions from the plant have fallen dramatically since that time.

Shallow wells also have proven a weak spot for the Kenton area, with state officials forced into emergency well replacements in 2002 after a gasoline tank leak.

Longtime Kenton resident Ronald Mosher said he remains skeptical about the cancer risk in his community.

"They could probably spend their money better on something else. I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary here," Mosher said.

DNREC and the EPA have noticed problems in the past, however.

An EPA study released in 1999 ranked New Castle County among the nation's worst for risks from inhalation of benzene, a common pollutant from motor vehicles and factory emissions. The same study also ranked New Castle County among the worst for risks from exposure to vinyl chloride, a pollutant released in large amounts by Formosa Plastics south of New Castle.

"I'm not surprised by what they're finding. Years ago, there was talk about high cancer rates in some communities, and I think South Wilmington was one of those hot spots," said Deborah Deubert, who directs the Rose Hill Community Center just south of Wilmington. "They're still concerned there."

Until recently, northern Delaware factories ranked among the nation's worst for emissions of mercury, vinyl chloride, toxic sulfur compounds and carcinogenic acrylonitrile, according to federal records. The Delaware City Refinery in the past released more than 40,000 tons of sulfur dioxide a year, a compound that plays a role in formation of acid rain, smog and toxic soot.

Pollution sources in east Wilmington include DuPont's Edge Moor pigment plant. The plant was identified by the EPA in 2001 as one of the nation's largest sources of dioxin waste material.

Factory emissions have fallen over the years, however, and Hughes said DNREC studies in 2005 found traffic pollution might prove a greater hazard.

"We found, not to our surprise, that the highest levels, the only ones that were unusual or unexpectedly high, were near Martin Luther King Boulevard [in Wilmington] and heavy vehicular traffic," Hughes said. "Not all cancer problems can be solved simplistically. It takes a broad-based effort."

M.Q. Riding, a spokeswoman for Conectiv Energy, said the company has not yet seen the latest cancer study report. Conectiv operates the Edge Moor/Hay Road generating complex in east Wilmington, ranked as the state's second-largest source of toxic emissions.

The Red Lion district, a compact area that takes in the Delaware City petrochemical complex and some of the state's most-polluted landscape, exhibited some of the lowest rates for cancer overall, with rates for some cancers omitted entirely because too few were reported in the district.

Though its population was similar to the Kenton district's in 2000, Red Lion covers less territory, and emissions from area plants have regularly turned up in other areas, with New Jersey officials recently blaming the Delaware City refinery for odors reported by hundreds in January.

Few theories were available Wednesday for the colorectal cancer cluster found in the Middletown-Odessa area.

About 45 percent more cases of colorectal cancer occurred in a fast-growing area south of the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal and north of Smyrna. That tract saw a nearly 39 percent

population increase between 2000 and 2005.

Holly Roberts, a resident of Nautical Cove near the C&D Canal north of Middletown, said she was aware of one nearby resident who had developed cancer since the community was formed less than 15 years ago.

"I would think they should look into it," Roberts said. "There's nothing I can think of around here that would cause that."

David Small, DNREC's deputy secretary, said recent studies of public water supplies and groundwater near known hazardous-waste sites also show little chance of public exposure.

Nicholas A. DiPasquale, Delaware Audubon Society conservation chairman and a former state environmental chief, said hazards remain.

"It's not a surprise to me or to anybody else who has looked at these issues over the last decade or so," DiPasquale said. "If you look at the concentration of industry and population density and, in particular, look at car exhaust, all of those things contribute to the chemical soup that we end up breathing."

Austin, a retired Environmental Protection Agency scientist who lives near Rehoboth Beach, said that Delaware officials need to investigate.

A cancer cluster study last year led to stepped-up calls for tougher controls on the Indian River power plant near Millsboro, the state's leading source of toxic air pollutants.

"In the end, from my own perspective, it comes down to a simple question: 'Would I choose to move my family to an area with a higher cancer incidence if I had a choice to live somewhere else?' " Austin said.
