

First time in 25 years; lower fed standards slated

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday it agrees with the state's data showing the five-parish area, including East Baton Rouge, has met the federal standard for ozone pollution.

For the first time, it's possible the five-parish area could officially meet federal standards for ozone, just in time for new and lower standards to begin.

"It's been a very long time, 25 years or more, since we've been in a position where we meet the standard across the state," said Michael Vince, state Department of Environmental Quality administrator for the air quality assessment division.

Except for the five-parish area of East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Livingston, Iberville and Ascension, all other parishes in the state were already in compliance with the ozone standard.

The state knew in 2008 that the area met the federal standard, but it takes time to put necessary rules in place and have the data reviewed and accepted by EPA, Vince said.

Although a new and lower standard is being considered by EPA — which should be announced later this year — meeting the 1997 eight-hour average ozone standard is a milestone, Vince said.

The EPA announcement Thursday says the state's data shows compliance.

The state now awaits the EPA decision to categorize the Baton Rouge area as an "attainment" area. Nationwide, that decision process usually takes less than a year to complete, Vince said.

Vince said he hopes EPA will officially categorize the five-parish area as being in compliance before the lower standards take effect, which will likely be next August.

Currently, the EPA is considering whether that lower standard will be between 60 and 70 parts per billion — a level that could put many areas of the state out of compliance.

Ozone is a pollution that forms when volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides from industry, vehicles and other sources combine in the air during hot, sunny days. On days when there isn't much wind, this pollution can accumulate in an area and cause lung problems for some people.

The eight-hour ozone standard is calculated by taking the fourth-highest eight-hour average of ozone from each year and then averaging three years of that data.

To meet the standard, that average needs to be 84 parts per billion or less.