BATON ROUGE, La. -- A group of environmental activists on Friday began a 10-day march across south Louisiana's chemical belt to protest air, water and land pollution.

"This action today will represent the coming together of a number of constituents in what is known as Cancer Alley,' said Pat Bryant, executive director of the Louisiana Toxics Project.

Gathering first at Devil's Swamp, an abandoned toxic waste dump north of Baton Rouge, the group included members of various environmental groups and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, which represents workers at many of the scores of chemical plants between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

"We're working together for the long haul to assert our rights for clean air, clean land and clean water,' Bryant said.

About 100 protesters carried signs reading "Breath or Death,' "Industry: Clean Up Your Act -- We Have to Live Here' and "Clean Air and Water -- An Endangered Species.'

Greenpeace, an activist environmental group, has been taking water samples and analyzing the waste content of chemical plant dumpings in the Mississippi River. The organization recently issued a report suggesting a correlation between higher mortality rates in communities along the river and the presence of chemical plants.

The march first passed two Baton Rouge-area plants and Rollins Environmental Services, a controversial hazardous waste disposal firm, before a rally at Southern University.

After traveling through the chemical belt, the marchers plan to wrap up their protest Nov. 19-20 in New Orleans.

Bryant said the marchers intended to "focus our attention on each parish so the people will know what toxins are coming out of each plant.'
Richard Kleiner, a spokesman for the Louisiana Chemical Association, said the industry group welcomed the attention the march was bringing.

"The chemical industry recognizes that Louisiana has some environmental problems, and some of those problems are related to industry. We think it's important that the environmental problems be presented. More importantly, the march is bringing attention to the solutions,' he said.

Kleiner said the industry was involved in programs to control pollutants and was either cleaning up abandoned dump sites, such as Devil's Swamp, or reaching agreements to do so.

"Over the past 10 to 15 years, the petrochemical industry has reduced hydrocarbon emissions in the air by 60 percent. We've reduced pollutants to the Mississippi River by 90 percent, and we have instituted hazardous waste reduction programs. The programs to reduce these hazardous emissions will continue,' he said.

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