$338 million project set for Atchafalaya Basin

Mockingbird chicks attend unveiling of first-phase plans

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BUTTE LA ROSE — Several politicians joined preservationists, environmentalists and a trio of mockingbird chicks Thursday to unveil plans for the first phase of a $338 million preservation and improvement project in the Atchafalaya Basin.

The chicks, whose mother was scared away by the crowd, fell out of their nest about halfway through the morning press conference, and although they caused quite a stir, they largely ignored the festivities.

Everyone else was at the Butte La Rose rest stop of Interstate 10 to hear details of the 15-year project that will preserve portions of the basin and construct facilities aimed at bringing tourists closer to the environmental treasure.

"This is a great day for the Atchafalaya Basin, a day we've been waiting for a very long time," said Sandra Thompson, director of the state Department of Natural Resources' Atchafalaya Basin Program.

St. Martin Parish President Scott Angelle said the project is important to the people of his parish.

"The Atchafalaya Basin means so much to the people of St. Martin Parish," Angelle said. "The people of this parish long ago fought the fight to keep it wet and wild."

Angelle said it is important that the basin be preserved.

"What a tragedy it would be if we raised a generation of children who knew the basin's beauty only through photographs and videotapes," Angelle said.

Among the facilities planned in the first phase of the 15-year project are a welcome center, a children's fishing pier over Lake Pelba, and boardwalks and trails at Butte La Rose and Henderson, said DNR Secretary Jack Caldwell.

The project is a team effort between state and federal governments. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will contribute $250 million over the 15-year period. The state will contribute about $85 million, with an additional $3 million in local and federal funds making up the remainder of the $338 million budget.

The plan funded by that budget was created by the 125 members of the Atchafalaya Basin Advisory Committee and was reviewed at nine public hearings held last year.

The project will be a joint effort of several state agencies, Caldwell said. "This is a unique venture in the annals of government, a true federal and state partnership."

The first construction will be the visitor's center at Butte La Rose.

The state Department of Transportation and Development has committed to building a new rest area at the Interstate 10 exit and to improving roads in the area, said DOTD Secretary Kam Movassaghi.

The state Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism will operate the visitor's center.

"If you come back to this area in 18 months, I think you will be impressed," said Secretary Phillip Jones. "We plan a state of the art visitors center here that will be the only one of its kind in Louisiana."

The center will have educational and interpretive exhibits, Jones said.

"Our visitors will be able to learn more about the heritage of the area, in addition to the natural scenic beauty," he said. "I know this will be a popular stop, and we hope to have an impact by extending the stays of visitors who come to this area."

The state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries has promised to stock Lake Pelba with fish so that children who stop at the pier will go away disappointed. In addition to stocking the lake and maintaining trails into the department's wildlife management area, agents will be working with LSU to improve the hydrology of the basin, said DWF Secretary Jimmy Jenkins.

"I know that's important to the crawfishermen," Jenkins said. "We have a lot of ponds, but the basin is the largest wild crawfish area in the state."

The basin is a renowned recreational fishing spot, and the mouth of the Atchafalaya is one of the only building deltas in the country, Jenkins said. Deer hunters and duck hunters alike use the basin, and birders know it is a migration route for millions of neo-tropical birds, Jenkins said.

The fishing pier will introduce children to the richness of the basin, Jenkins said.

"It's a wonderful way for children to get started in this sportsman's paradise," Jenkins said.

State Rep. Sydnie Mae Durand, D-St. Martinville, said the project has been a long time coming.

"People from all over become mesmerized when they see the basin," Durand said.

"Now they will be able to stop, relax, and enjoy the area. Finally, we are going forward."