The national wetlands research center is moving to Lafayette and expanding its mission. It will help the economy, too.

"There has been much talk since the oil and gas industry went bust of the need to diversify the Lafayette economy; the talk has focused often on high-tech development. The relocation of the National Wetlands Research Center to Lafayette is just the sort of development community leaders had in mind, so it's no wonder they are highly pleased.

The research center isn't going to turn the economy around. It's director says it won't even make a significant impact for two or three years. It's a government research center, not a private company that will spread its wealth around the city in its pursuit of profit.

But the National Wetlands Research Center will bring several million dollars worth of investment to the city as well as dozens of scientists and researchers who will be an asset to the community. The center will generate unique research into solutions to wetlands and wildlife problems that threaten the nation's coastline, the environment and even the duck population. The prestige factor of the center's association with USL and Lafayette is incalculable.

At the moment, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wetlands Research Center is crammed into NASA's George C. Marshall Space Flight Center Computer Complex in Huntsville. There isn't enough office space, and boxes of publications and other materials are stacked to the ceiling in the library. Field research stations are set up in Baton Rouge, Aransas Pass, Texas, and Vicksburg, but the facilities limit what the research center can do, says director Bob Stewart. "We cannot do research from here that involves dragging critters or laboratory equipment or anything else here," he says.

For most of its existence, first as the National Coastal Ecosystems Team and since 1986 as the National Wetlands Research Center, the focus was on studying and collating information, collecting and analyzing what has already been done rather than engaging in original pure research. The result was literally hundreds of publications on topics such as "Decline of Submerged Aquatic Plants in Chenier Plain," "The Ecology of Pacific Northwest Coastal Sand Dunes," and "Ecology of Barataria Basin, Louisiana." The center is also responsible for the maps one sees in newspapers and magazines showing what could happen to the coastal U.S. through erosion and other factors.

Meanwhile, the national impact of the loss of what was once thought to be useless swamps, bogs and marsh was becoming clear. Stewart says the marshlands of Louisiana are worth at least $1 billion annually in terms of the commercial value of the seafood and other products generated by them.

A sense of urgency was developing about the continuing loss of these resources. For example, according to center literature, 215 million acres of wetlands existed in the continental United States at the time of European settlement. Today, less than 99 million acres of those wetlands are still around. The average annual loss is estimated at 550,000 thousand acres.

"I've been frustrated," says Stewart. "I see some action now." The move to a site on Congress Street donated by USL, as well as increased funding by the federal government will allow a major expansion of the center's ability to generate extensive original research. The move was prompted by the lack of available space at the island facility and an asbestos problem there. Stewart foresees work on the feasibility, both environmental and economic, of what are now only ideas to stop coastal erosion. The center also will be more involved with private landowners in working on problems such as erosion and declining breeding grounds for waterfowl.

The center will of course employ high-tech methods, such as satellite imaging. Much of its research already involves computer imaging and the use of computer models to predict changes in a particular habitat or the effect of manmade change on that environment. But the researchers are also geared to the field.

"My entire branch is hip boots and boats," says Carroll Cordes, branch chief for waterfowl research. That office is in Baton Rouge but will relocate to Lafayette. Cordes was a member of the graduate faculty at USL for several years and says he is looking forward to returning to Lafayette. At USL, he specialized in integrating biology with computer and statistical applications, now he hopes to integrate the functions of the waterfowl branch with USL. Put more simply, there should be plenty of opportunities for student interns.

The waterfowl branch addresses issues that directly affect the Louisiana duck hunter—how the nationwide drought will affect the duck population this fall, for example. Data gathered by Cordes' branch will be used by state officials making decisions about the upcoming duck season, which, by the way, Cordes terms "depressed." The proximity of Lafayette to the duck hunting territory of southwestern Louisiana will aid the branch in what will be a critical area of research, Cordes says. He also intends to emphasize working with private landowners to find ways to preserve those habitats while providing economic incentives to do so.

The National Wetlands Research Center is a long way from moving day. In that respect, it is similar to...