Indian Bayou — The Sierra Club and the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources honored the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Wednesday for acquiring 50,000 acres of the Atchafalaya Basin to help keep it “wet and wild.”

The acquisition capped an effort that began nearly three decades ago, said U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, one of several speakers at a ceremony at a recreational site in the basin north of Butte La Rose.

"We do not inherit this Earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children and grandchildren," Landrieu, D-La., said.

The effort will assure that some of the basin will be preserved for future generations, she said.

In addition to the acreage bought, the corps continues to buy easements that will protect 338,000 acres from development and restore water flow for fish and wildlife.

Charles Fryling of the Sierra Club said he and others who wanted the basin preserved were horrified by plans to pump the basin “into Venice. ... They wanted canals and gondoliers to attract tourists.”

So the club began working with other groups and the state to preserve as much of the basin as possible, Fryling said.

Sierra Club founder John Muir would be proud of the work the corps and state have done to provide public access and preserve the basin, Fryling said.

Kai Midboe, former secretary of the Department of Natural Resources under former Gov. David Treen, recounted the early history of the effort to preserve the basin, which he said was quite controversial.

"I remember a hearing in Morgan City in the early 1980s "when four little Boy Scouts got shouted down" for wanting to preserve the basin, Midboe said.

Treen decided to work with willing sellers to try to open a good portion of the Atchafalaya Basin to public access, Midboe said.

Dow Chemical's donation of 48,000 acres was crucial, Midboe said.

In 1983, the Louisiana congressional delegation succumbed in getting the Corps of Engineers authorized to spend up to $250 million on land acquisition in the basin.

Little was done by the state to make that a reality until Gov. Mike Foster and Natural Resources Secretary Jack Caldwell began to try to cash in on the corps' authorization, Midboe said.

Caldwell said the effort got off to a good start when the state dropped a questionable challenge to the ownership of land near Butte La Rose so the Atchafalaya Land Co. could sell some of that land.

It then donated 4,500 acres, some of which will be the site of a new $3 million tourist center and nature walk at the Interstate 10 exit for Butte La Rose.

The company was one of several large landowners also recognized at Wednesday's festivities. Gen. Edwin J. Arnold Jr., head of the corps' Mississippi Valley Division, said, "We hope we are not done here. We hope it is just a step."

"It is amazing how much we can accomplish when we team up," he said, noting that the corps and the Sierra Club have sometimes been at odds on other issues.

Through the end of the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30, the corps will have spent about $91 million on the Atchafalaya preservation and restoration effort.

The whole project is expected to exceed $202 million.

The plan includes 50,000 acres of purchased land, a goal celebrated Wednesday, and acquisition of easements on 338,000 acres.

Thus far, 141,370 acres of easements, which will prevent development but keep property in private hands, have been completed, the corps said in a fact sheet handed out at the ceremony.

Logging will be restricted, especially for wetland varieties, and structures limited, the corps said.

The whole basin, between U.S. 190 and Morgan City, totals 386,000 acres, so about 87 percent of it will remain in private hands and without public access.

In terms of recreational improvements, the visitor center, boat ramps and campgrounds will be added, with the state picking up 50 percent of those costs.

Maintenance costs will be between the corps, 75 percent of the state, 25 percent, the corps and local sponsors will pay the remaining.