Agreement to Purchase Basin May Run Out Of Time

BATON ROUGE, La. — An offer to sell Atchafalaya Basin acreage to the government may expire before Congress begins work on its side of the deal, according to an aide to U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston.

The state must sign an agreement by the end of the year and pay for the land within three years, a basin landowner spokesman said Tuesday. But the Reagan administration said it won’t take the proposal before Congress until the plan goes through full review by the Army Corps of Engineers — something that could take several years.

That means it could be four or five years before Congress acts on a request to pay half the $50 million needed to buy the 46,000 acres of basin wilderness, said Skip Walton of Johnston’s office.

But Kai Midboe, an aide to Gov. Treen, and spokesmen the landowners said they feel the administration’s position can be changed.

“We still haven’t given up on the federal government,” he added.

The main job is to convince the president to take the land sale part of the project as a separate item from the rest of the proposal and act on it prior to the rest, Midboe said.

Newman Trowbridge, who represents the landowners, said he feels the Louisiana delegation can convince Reagan to take the matter up within a year or two.

In the meantime, the state must make a firm decision to go on with the project and sign an agreement with the landowners if the sale is going to become reality, Trowbridge said.

“The federal government is not going to put up its money until the state does,” he added.

The legislature is laying the groundwork with two bills — one authorizing the state to make the deal and another to provide its portion of the funds, Trowbridge said.

The purchase proposal was part of a much heralded compromise engineered by Treen last year. As part of the compromise, a group of basin landowners agreed to sell 46,000 acres of basin property to the government for public recreation and wildlife preservation.

But the purchase proposal is currently part of a major flood control and environmental easement plan proposed by the Corps.