Atchafalaya Basin Blues

Once fertile bass spawning grounds are silting up while officials struggle for answers

By JOE MACALUSO
Advocate outdoors writer

Sid Sanders and Ernie Gammon believe a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project is ruining one of the state's prime bass spawning grounds.

They're asking lots of questions these days and say they're not getting any answers.

"All we want to know is why the (U.S. Army) Corps of Engineers continues with a project that's silting up Grand Lake," Sanders said Tuesday. "We want to know who made the decision, and how we can get it stopped."

Gammon, with a disgusted look on his face, nodded.

"I just don't understand why the corps wants to continue doing this," Gammon said.

"This is where Sanders, Gammon and television film crews were standing Tuesday. It was in the heart of the Atchafalaya Basin - Grand Lake, which federal and state fisheries biologists and veteran bass fishermen know is one of the prime spawning grounds for black bass in the basin."

Sanders and Gammon did the talking while cameras rolled off-foot after foot of tape documenting that "this" was a dry ground where, just three years ago, there was water as deep as four feet during the basin's low-water period.

"We were catching fish here, right near this spot. Now we're walking on it," Sanders said. "Something went wrong."

David Walther, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fisheries biologist, said the corps acted on a USFWS' 1992 request to find a solution to the low dissolved oxygen problems in the south-east portion of the basin. Low dissolved oxygen was a factor in the massive fish kill when Hurricane Andrew swept over the basin in August, 1992.

Robert Campos, senior project manager for the corps' New Orleans District, said his office responded with a project already on the drawing board.

The plan involved dredging a canal from Blue Point Chute to Thibodaux Chute. Branches of the new channel were dredged from Thibodaux Chute to the lower ends of Grand Lake and Schwing Chute, two popular recreational and commercial fishing spots.

Campos said this particular project "was done by design. We were implementing another phase of the plan. It was a good time to do it and it was a good place to do it."

Campos said he didn't understand the objections to the project.

"The sediment in Grand Lake is not the result of channels. Mother Nature is filling in Grand Lake, not the corps," Campos said.

That explanation at Thursday night's public hearing on the basin in Baton Rouge stunned Gammon.

"I just don't understand how he can say that," Gammon said. "All you have to do is know that before the dredging, there was water here and after the project was finished, the south end of Grand Lake is silting up very fast."

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Gammon said the siltation, which covers three-quarters of a mile of lower Grand Lake and the southern end of Schwing Chute, was discussed even before the project was started.

In a Sept. 19, 1990 letter to Gammon, Col. Richard Gorski, the officer in charge of the corps' New Orleans district, wrote, "A weir near the (Atchafalaya River) main channel will control the amount of freshwater diverted. The design of the weir will reduce the amount of sediment passing through it... Therefore, less sediment laden flows will be reaching Grand Lake from this site."

Sanders, who owns a Baton Rouge insurance agency, and Gammon, a land and hydrological (water) surveyor, said they weren't angry about the initial results of the project.

"We knew the corps was trying to do something, and we don't fault them for trying," Sanders said. "What we're trying to figure out is why the corps came back in here this summer and dredged the project out again."

Sanders said he can't find anyone in any state agency who was informed by the corps of the redredging activity. Two Department of Wildlife and Fisheries employees, Blue Watson of the Environmental Section and Inland Fisheries' assistant administrator Arthur Williams, said they had not received notice from the corps about the activity.

Sanders said that violated the agreement worked out in the early 1980s which required the corps to advise other federal agencies along with state agencies about work in the Basin.

Walther admitted to the East Ascension Sportsman's League Monday night that the plan has not worked, that instead of bringing freshwater into the southeastern portion of the Basin, "that it is bringing far too much sediment to this area."

Gammon said that's what he and Sanders want the corps to admit.

"All along I thought water was supposed to flow from north to south," Rodrigue said at Thursday night's hearing. "All I can tell you is that I'm 30 years old and there are places this high (holding his hand over his head) where there used to be crawfish."

"Everybody's talking about the Basin being wet and wild, well the Basin ain't too wet anymore," Rodrigue said.

When Sanders and Gammon returned to their boats Tuesday morning, both admitted they were not sure what the future held for Grand Lake.

"All we want from the corps is to stop this project. This was an experiment that didn't work," Gammon said. "To downsize the project isn't going to work because the same people who designed the last project will design the downsized project. And, I'm not sure anyone who wants to see the siltation stopped will have a lot of confidence in them. I know I don't — and won't."

Bayou Pigeon commercial fishermen Kerry Rodrigue said the water in the channel flows south to north.