Bayou Benoit, La. (AP) — "We'll fight this to the end," says Mrs. Gilbert Blanchard, owner of a country bait store which is threatened by a levee improvement program.

The store is on federal property, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has given all 34 families in this small community in St. Martin Parish until July 15 to move out so the engineers can strengthen the levee along the Atchafalaya Basin.

Seventeen families now remain, and most of them refuse to move.

"If we have to go to court, we'll do that," vows Mrs. Blanchard, who has operated the store with her husband for about two years.

She says they are still paying on their store and just can't afford to move.

A few hundred yards down the dusty shell road is another country store and bait station operated by Mrs. Mayonna Daigle and her husband. They also are being evicted.

"We can't move out," says Mrs. Daigle. "We can't afford to move. We applied for a loan to the Small Business Administration four months ago, but we haven't heard from them."

The store is just a few yards from the levee, and clouds of white shell dust cover the store and the boxes, crates, and barrels stacked around it every time a car or truck passes.

Mrs. Daigle says she and her husband still owe quite a bit on money for equipment at the store. They recently put in a large bait freezer on a permanent concrete slab. The freezer, used to store crawfish bait for commercial fishermen, cost $18,000, she says.

Everyone knew they were building on federal property, but no one really worried about it until recently.

"We were under the impression that we were safe," says Mrs. Daigle.

That irritates the Corps of Engineers and officials of the Atchafalaya Basin Levee District, who contend that the whole community was illegally built on federal property.

"They have never paid any taxes on the property," says a levee board spokesman.

"They are really just squatters on federal land."

The engineers say the levee itself in that area is strong, but the levee berms — slopes of land sheltering the levee — are sinking. They want to widen the berms several hundred feet, and also raise the levee crown. And that means destroying Bayou Benoit.

"I've had whippings in my life," says Mrs. Daigle. "But this is it."