Atchafalaya Controversy Ends With Compromise

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The 10-year battle over the Atchafalaya Basin came to a peaceful conclusion in 1961.

On Nov. 19, Governor Dave Treen announced a compromise real estate plan which had the support of all special interest groups involved. The plan included a donation to the state of more than 40,000 acres of land in and around the basin by Dow Chemical Co.; an agreement by private landowners to sell to the state; and a revised flood control easement.

The Dow Chemical donation is located mostly within the basin in Iberville, St. Martin and Iberia parishes.

The state previously owned 150,000 acres of the river basin and the compromise plan called for acquisition of 45,000 to 50,000 acres from private landowners. Treen said with the donation and purchase of additional land, about 240,000 acres, or 60 percent of the basin will be open to the public.

Treen called the plan his major accomplishment since taking office. However, the real significance of the compromise was that it had unanimous support of all special-interest groups involved. The Louisiana Landowners Association joined with Save the Atchafalaya Basin Inc., the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Wildlife Federation, the Louisiana Wildlife Federation and the local Audubon Society and Sierra spokespersons in approving Treen’s efforts in bringing the opposing factions together with the compromise plan.

Also as part of the plan, flood control will be federally funded and will be tightened to cover the entire basin to prevent conversion from its natural state. In addition, any major industrial, recreational or commercial uses would have to be approved by Congress.

The remaining issue is how the real estate plan, which may cost as much as $140 million, will be funded.

When Treen announced the plan, he stressed a willingness to share costs with the Federal government. Two days later, he began working toward that goal by hosting a tour of the Atchafalaya Basin for Department of Interior James Watt.

Watt voiced strong support for Treen’s plan, but stopped short of committing federal dollars to the proposal.

The secretary said funds allocated to the basin would come from the Land-Water Conservation Fund and would need Congressional approval. A backlog of $3 billion in requests for monies from that fund already exists and the Atchafalaya basin proposal will have to compete with those to receive the funds.