Atchafalaya plan to advance outdoor opportunities

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“...The Atchafalaya Basin will become the outdoor equivalent of New Orleans now that the state's master plan is under way, state officials said Wednesday. The nearly $340-million program to upgrade the recreational opportunities in the nation's largest hardwood swamp will at the same time ensure the Basin remains free of commercialization.

The Atchafalaya Basin Master Plan, which includes improvements from Simmesport near the center of the state to Stephensville in St. Martin Parish 130 miles away, was previewed to the public at a day-long event that included boat tours, public officials from more than a dozen federal and state agencies, and a hint of what's in store for the swampland.

“The point of the state’s master plan is to preserve the largest freshwater swamp in the U.S., to make sure it stays undeveloped and at the same time increase its recreational uses,” said Jack Caldwell, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources.

The plan will cost about $86 million in state money over the next 15 years, with the federal government adding another $250 million during the same period.

Participants in Wednesday’s event included landowners in the Basin.

“...This will do good for everybody who appreciates the beauty and wildlife here,” said Harry Anderson of Lafayette, who owns a small tract of land at Butte La Rose in St. Martin Parish where he intends to build a camp. “This is one of the best things for the state of Louisiana — this is the next Everglades.”

The recreational features of the plan are extensive. Included are boat launch upgrades at Butte La Rose, elevated boardwalks, bike trails and improved access and levee roads in Henderson, recreational vehicle pads and a pavilion in St. Martinville, levee road improvements on the way to Lake Fausse Pointe and, in Catahoula, an interpretive and cultural center, nature trails, boat docks and boat launch upgrades.

In Stephensville, a park that will include trails, a boat launch and picnic areas is recommended. And, at Lynch Natural Heritage Park near Henderson, a boat dock, bridge and research center will be built.

Also in Henderson, the plan recommends a natural area for alligators along the tour boat route.

The complete list will be unveiled today when Gov. Mike Foster signs HB114, sponsored by Rep. Butch Gautreaux, D-Morgan City, which creates a new agency within the DNR to administer the plan. The bill also creates a citizens commission composed of whoever wants to become involved, Gautreaux said.

“This is why this plan is a success,” he said. “Everyone has cooperated — environmentalists, sports fishermen and commercial interests.”

The chair of the Atchafalaya Basin Advisory Committee, Sandra Thompson, is the person receiving credit for organizing and coordinating the many government agencies cooperating in the venture. She has been involved in Basin preservation in one way or another on the state level for 25 years.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been the only government agency involved in Basin management for about 10 years, Thompson said, primarily because the state was out of money. But Foster revived the initiative of state management and, through a unique partnership Louisiana agencies, will now be involved in the management and maintenance of the Atchafalaya Basin.

“This is the renaissance of the Basin,” Caldwell said. “We’re going to really set sail this time.”