Avery Island's balance of nature and industry touted

By MIKE HASTEN
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AVERY ISLAND - This green speck of high land in the Iberia Parish marsh has been called one of the saltiest, sweetest, spiciest, oiliest places in the world.

Gov. Buddy Roemer got a taste of most of the above and a look at all Monday as he toured what some writers have called a southern paradise.

Although he appeared to get a lot of pleasure from it, Roemer was not at Avery Island on a pleasure trip. He was there to get a look at how industry can cohabitate with nature with neither suffering.

The House Natural Resources Committee's subcommittee on environmental quality and Department of Environmental Quality Secretary Paul Templet joined the governor on a tour of the International Salt Company mine and the McIlhenny Company's Jungle Gardens and Tabasco Plant.

"This is where we put our best foot forward," said New Iberia Rep. Ted Haik, as he explained how oil companies, a salt mine and an international hot sauce company could all operate on a small island and not disturb the beauty of Jungle Gardens.

Unlike some of south Louisiana's "islands" that actually are just high points in the marsh, Avery Island is truly an island surrounded by Bayou Petit Anse. "You can't get off without getting your feet wet," said Paul McIlhenny with a laugh.

McIlhenny is the sixth generation in his family to live and work on the island, which was created when a huge mound of salt was pushed upward. It was the salt in brine pools that first brought man to the island 12,000 years ago and industry to it in 1860 when rock salt was discovered just 30 feet below the surface.

Oil and gas, two other industries on the island, were not discovered until 80 years later.

An elevator plunged the governor and his 30-member entourage into total darkness as it sped to the floor of the salt mine 1,100 feet below the surface. Personnel carriers took the group through cavernous 10-foot-high pathways past huge equipment used to bring salt to the surface.

The mine is worked by drilling holes into sections of the walls 28 feet wide and 100 feet high, or by drilling 30 feet into the floor. A 20-foot-long chain saw cuts a swath to give the salt room to expand when it is blasted by 95 loads of ammonium nitrate and diesel fuel. All blasting is done at night, after all miners have left.

The resulting blasts leave a pile of salt ready to be scooped up and hauled away.

The world's largest front loaders and dump trucks are used in the mine to scoop up loose salt that has been blasted free and transport it to conveyors and elevators. To get the equipment into the mine, it had to be disassembled, lowered in pieces and then put back together at the bottom of the mine. One front loader, which can haul 13 tons of salt at a time, is so large it had to be cut apart with a blow torch and then welded back together. The engine was lowered part by part and the reassembly took three months.

Leaving the mine, the group toured the Tabasco plant where workers make and bottle every drop of the sauce that is marketed nationwide.

A chorus of coughing broke out as the fumes of vinegar and peppers hit the group. Even McIlhenny, one of the owners of the facility, choked. "It's the vinegar," he says.

The Tabasco factory is a natural for the island. It has no pollutants other than the vinegar smell, and utilizes the peppers that have long been grown there.

Now, the island's peppers are primarily used for seed to plant larger pepper plantations McIlhenny owns in South America.

The salt mine also is relatively non-polluting with only an occasional salty breeze.

But the surprising industry on the island is oil and gas. Most visitors are unaware of its existence because of tight restrictions placed on the industry by the McIlhenny family. There are no sludge pits and no torches burning excess gas. Neal production sites can be seen if one knows where to look.

Michey McIlhenny said petroleum exploration has caused some problems for the island but those are being taken care of by plugging production canals and building weirs to slow erosion.

"If we had known then what we know now, they wouldn't have had those canals," he said. "We have industry but not at the expense of the environment."