Atchafalaya Basin Battle Continues

BATON ROUGE — Atchafalaya Basin landowners and sportsmen who want to turn the vast wilderness into a recreation area exchanged angry words yesterday before a House committee here. They later agreed to at least a temporary truce.

At issue was a resolution asking the governor to kill any plans for a federal recreation district in the semi-wilderness of the basin.

The landowners, represented by Rep. Esper Marroneaux, expressed resentment they had not been consulted in any of the preliminaries for seeking a recreation area. They vocally expressed the point that they were about to be dictated to on the use of their lands without having a say to say about it.

Led by Rep. H. B. DeJean, Opeletousa, opponents of the resolution asked that the landowners permit a newly appointed basin commission to work out solutions to the many problems involved to preserve the basin in its present form.

Amendment Accepted

An amendment authored by Rep. Carl Bauer, Franklin, proposed that the commission be consulted after making it study and before steps are taken to close the door on federal recreational development. Both sides reluctantly accepted his proposal and the amended resolution was sent to the House floor where another fight is expected.

"How can any group advocate getting the federal government to own the land why private land owners?" Marroneaux asked.

His colleague, Rep. Robert Freeman, Plaquemine, added, "This already is a recreation area. The federal government isn't going to make it any better."

Courtney Comments

E. A. Courtney, Hammond, operating manager of the St. Martin and Iberville Land Co., stressed that landowners are just as interested as the ecologists in maintaining the wilderness area. He said fears that soybean plantings will further encroach on the basin are groundless because it's not economically feasible to move them further south than at present.

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George Wilbert, Plaquemine, a basin property owner, said, "I resent that someone else is trying to tell me what to do with my land. It's been in my family since 1897. We paid for it and we paid the taxes on it. There are 90 of us Wilberts and not one of us has been approached about this recreation area."

Not A Problem

James Marroneaux of Plaquemine, agreed that additional soybean farming isn't a problem. "It takes a damn fool," he said, "to go in on that 7 or 8 feet, above sea level land to plant soybeans."

Opposing the resolution as originally written, Dr. Leslie Glasgow, former state and federal wildlife official, observed, "There's been a lot of confusion over this. I don't know whether it's for lack of information or is being sponsored deliberately."

He explained that a national recreation area, unlike a national park, has regulations pointed basin commission to worked out between the government and private property owners. "We have only two objectives in the basin," he said, "to keep it in timber and to keep it open to the public."

One Plan

He noted a private New Orleans group has already expressed intentions of acquiring a large bloc of basin land and closing it off to the public.

As a recreation area, he said, landowners can still cut timber, they can still drill for oil and hunting and fishing will be regulated by the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission. Sponsors of those amendments had argued the opposite of everyone of those points.

B.E.M. Skerrett III, Lafayette, president of the Greater Atchafalaya Basin Council, told the committee his group was seeking alternatives, including the federal area approach, before approaching landowners with a proposal.

A 20-member state group with similar purposes was appointed by Gov. McKeithen last week.

During the hearing, DeJean said, "If you think the basin isn't being ruined, just fly over it. I was flying over it the other day, and realized that the score was Dome Stadium 150, Basin of Louisiana eough to get off its knees and do something about this."