WASHINGTON — The Atchafalaya River Basin in Southern Louisiana, regarded by some qualified observers as similar in many respects to the Florida Everglades, is going to be investigated by the Interior Department to determine if a national recreation area may be established here.

Sen. Allen J. Ellender of Louisiana said Monday he received a letter from A. Heaton Underhill, acting director of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, who said the Atchafalaya Basin is worthy of national protection and should be investigated in detail.

"We will assist the state to the extent possible under our present severe fiscal restraints," Underhill said.

Ellender, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said he will seek funds to help establish the proposed national recreation area, if the study determines it is feasible.

Meantime, Underhill said the magnitude and detail of a complete study would require more authority and money presently available to the bureau.

The Louisiana Legislature and the state office of planning called on the Army Corps of Engineers to provide the land for the recreation area. However, the engineers said that at this time it was not in a position to provide either land or funds.

The Atchafalaya River is regarded as one of the world's largest tributary streams. It takes a substantial part of the water out of the main stem of the Mississippi River and sends it on a short cut to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Atchafalaya Basin is a part of the Lower Mississippi River floodway system. Most of the land in the basin is privately owned, and some owners have begun to clear it for soybean production. Soybeans currently are the country's top money crop in the overseas market.

"Although the land owners have the right to change their land use practices," Underhill wrote, "many of the conservationists of Louisians see the clearing and other activities as the destruction of one of the greatest swamp wildernesses in the United States."

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