1300 Square Miles of Unique, Irreplaceable Wildlife Habitat In Louisiana Is In Jeopardy — This Factual Comprehensive Report Documents The...

ATCHAFALAYA BASIN CRISIS

Grits Gresham

LOUISIANA WILD LIFE AND FISHERIES COMMISSION
WILD LIFE AND FISHERIES BUILDING
400 ROYAL STREET
NEW ORLEANS 16, LOUISIANA
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**ATCHAFALAYA BASIN CRISIS**

Grits Gresham

"The demand is surging. Whatever the measuring rod—visits to Federal and State recreation areas, fishing license holders, the number of outboard motors in use—it is clear that Americans are seeking the outdoors as never before. And this is only a foretaste of what is to come."

"The measure of the problem: outdoor recreation activity, already a major part of American life, will triple by the year 2000."

"Most people seeking outdoor recreation want water—to sit by, to swim and to fish in, to ski across, to dive under, and to run their boats over."

The positive statements above are from the most comprehensive study ever made of the present and future needs of America for outdoor recreation. They are from the report to the President and to Congress by the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, following its three year study of the topic.

The data and interpretation resulting in these statements stem from the collaboration of the very best individuals and organizations in the nation, and are therefore the most reliable in existence.

In the face of this array of responsible comments, we are faced with this incongruous situation: the fishing productivity and attractiveness of one of the nation's unique recreational areas is in danger of being destroyed, and by an agency of the same Federal government which produced the above report.

In startling contrast to the announced determination of the current Washington administration to firmly meet the outdoor recreational needs of America, we face the spectre of almost a million acres being removed from the outdoor recreation scene—by an agency of the present administration.

We confront a situation which promises to harm fish and wildlife values in 1300 square miles of unique, irreplaceable, high-value wildlife terrain ... and all in the name of "public good".

You should be interested, for that area is in Louisiana. It is the Atchafalaya Basin, a scenic, semi-wilderness area without parallel in production of fish and game.

To document this situation we will, in this article, tell you what the Atchafalaya is, why it is so valuable to sportsmen, and what threatens this superb recreational asset.

The basin of the Atchafalaya is the floodplain of the Atchafalaya River, a stream which originates near Simmesport where Red River and Old River combine, and which ends when it flows into the Gulf of Mexico near Morgan City. The east and west limits of the Basin are now defined by levees—the East Atchafalaya Basin Protection Levee on the east, and the West Atchafalaya Basin Protection Levee on the west.

The area enclosed by these two levees is about 17 miles wide and 75 miles long.

Within this strip of bottomland hardwood terrain, which is laced with lakes and sloughs and

This aerial view of the sprawling Atchafalaya Basin gives some idea of the vast wooded and watery area considered one of the most important remaining wildlife areas in the country.
cut by cross bayous to a progressively greater degree as we move south, the Atchafalaya River itself wanders, twists, and turns. There is a second set of levees along the River from its origin to about 20 miles south of U. S. Highway 190 on the west bank, and 10 miles south of 190 on the east bank.

The northern half of the Atchafalaya Basin, therefore, is divided into two floodways. That west of the River, between the levee along the west bank of the River and the West Protection Levee, is called the West Atchafalaya Floodway. That east of the River, between the levee along the east bank of the River and the East Protection Levee, is called the Morganza Floodway.

Below the point where the levees along the River end, the Morganza and West Atchafalaya floodways join to form the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway, which extends from East to West Protection levee.

Complicated in description, a glance at the accompanying map shows that this floodway system is simple in reality.

This IS a floodway system of the U.S. Corps of Engineers, a key part of the flood control plan for the lower Mississippi Valley. The plan is based on a “project flood” which would send three million cubic feet of water per second through Louisiana and into the Gulf via the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers.

A flood of this magnitude has never occurred since the advent of recording devices to measure river flow, but this mythical figure is the anticipated crisis level which Corps engineers have determined we must prepare for. To cope with this record flow portions of it have been “allotted” to various systems and floodways, with half—1,500,000 cfs—programmed for the Atchafalaya, and the other half to the Mississippi.

Completion of the huge Old River closure and control structure this year makes division of the water coming down the Red and Mississippi possible for the first time.

The Atchafalaya portion of this “project flood” is programmed to an even further degree. The River itself is designed to accommodate 650,000 cfs. When that flow is exceeded the Morganza Floodway, capable of handling 600,000 cfs, will come into use, which “will prevent dangerous floods in the lower Mississippi River and will have a lesser effect in lowering stages in the Red River Backwater Area and further upstream in the Mississippi River”.

The West Atchafalaya Floodway will come into use only when the combined capacity of the Mississippi River, the Atchafalaya River, and the Morganza Floodway have been exceeded. Under the project plan it is calculated that the West Atchafalaya Floodway must carry 250,000 cfs, and will be used once in one hundred years under the above conditions.

The history of floodplain of the Atchafalaya River has been one of overflow during periods of high water, followed by complete dewatering except for lakes and bayous. Virtually an annual occurrence, this cycle of water fluctuation is the ideal situation for production of most forms of fish and animal life.

Where game managers have been able to do so, throughout the nation, they have sought to duplicate this overflow pattern in efforts to stimulate production of fish and game. In Louisiana, in the Atchafalaya Basin and elsewhere, we have had this for free—courtesy of Mother Nature.

In seeking to establish just how good the outdoor resources of the Basin are we need first to itemize them. They include sport fishing, boating, hunting, commercial fishing, crawfishing, crabbing, trapping, and turtle catching.

They include the intangible, but very real, benefits that accrue to an area from having a vast semi-wilderness tract to terrain. This Atchafalaya Basin is the last of its kind in Louisiana—or anywhere else.

How good are the tangible assets? Let’s take them one by one.

For sport fishermen the Basin offers all of the freshwater fish associated with warm waters of the South—largemouth and spotted bass, black and white crappie, white and yellow bass, bream of many species, and catfish. Having fished from Atlantic to Pacific, from the Gulf to Canada and in foreign lands, I say without hesitation that the overflow areas of Louisiana, including the Basin, annually provide the best angling for these warm water species to be found anywhere.

This spring an experienced fisherman, who
Sport fishing interest in the Atchafalaya Basin area is obvious at any of several dozen launching and access sites. Long streams of automobiles line the roads leading to the area and parking spots are filled throughout the spring and summer months.

moved into the area and began fishing the Basin last year, wrote: “I have found so many good and productive places (to fish) that I know I can never fish them all if I live 50 more years. There is just no end to them. Last spring and summer I spent nearly every day with the bream and sac-a-lait and had to learn to throw back everything under a pound. The crappie here don’t run quite as large as in north Louisiana but there are a hundred times as many. The bream are oversize and 11/4 pounders are not uncommon.

“Since early in December I have switched to artificial lures and spin rig for sac-a-lait, and return nearly every day arm-weary from pulling them out. Limits are easy but I have trouble giving them away, so I just catch a box full and call it a day.”

Only since World War II has there been any significant amount of sport fishing in the Basin, and as yet the potential has scarcely been scratched. It lies within easy “fishing distance” of two million residents of Louisiana and, although the total amount of angling pressure has been sligt thus far, the increase in the fisherman use in each of the past few years has been substantial.

Figures on the usage of the Basin by sport fishermen are not easy to get simply because the area is so huge. Anglers come in from every point on the compass, and a “fisherman check” would be virtually impossible were it not for the fact that the levees themselves, and the bottomland type of terrain, limit access to a relatively few points.

During a nine day period in May of this year the Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission conducted an intensive census of Basin usage by sport fishermen, and the results are impressive.

Number of fishermen in the nine days—17,990!
Number of fish caught in the nine days—200,168!

Sunfish led the list with 137,772. Crappie were next—28,497; then bass, with 16,840. Check the table for a complete breakdown on fish and fishermen for east and west sides of the Basin.

These are staggering figures, especially when it is realized that a decade ago only a handful of sport fishermen even knew how to get into the lower Atchafalaya Basin. They become more significant when you consider that, even with some 18,000 fishermen in the area in a nine day period, most of the vast area remained untouched by lure.

The projected demand for sport fishing opportunity in the future, with figures from the same ORRRC report mentioned in the beginning of this article, indicates that pressure on sport fishing will increase 100% by 1976 (only a dozen years away), and triple by the year 2000.

Considering that there are now almost a million fishermen in Louisiana, we may easily anticipate the added impact of the above increases in future years.

Boating has become, since World War II, one of the greatest participation activities of the outdoors. Evidencing this is the fact that, in 1960, more than forty million Americans took part in recreational boating more than twice, which is a tremendous proportion of the nation’s population.

At all times of the year the Atchafalaya River itself is a fine stream for boaters, but during overflow periods the entire vast area of the Basin becomes a labyrinth of waterways which invite the adventuresome boater.

And there are thousands of such among the owners of more than eight million recreational boats in the U. S. (there were only 2 1/2 million in 1947).

Again we call on the ORRRC projection, and find that boating for pleasure should increase 80 per cent by 1976, and a staggering 250 per cent by the year 2000.

Hunting in the Basin is fair to excellent for deer, rabbits, squirrels, and ducks. It is for the latter, however, for ducks, that the pattern of annual de-watering and flooding is ideal.

Duck hunters have utilized the Basin heavily for the past decade, although severe restrictions in season length and bag limit curtailed hunter
Estimated number of sport fishermen and the number of fish caught using the Atchafalaya Floodway, Krotz Springs to Morgan City for the nine day period, May 11, through May 19, 1963 with the number of fishermen checked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of Sport Fishermen</th>
<th>Number of Fish Caught by Sport Fishermen Other Than Sport Crawfish Fishermen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bass</td>
<td>Crappie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAST SIDE</td>
<td>6,941</td>
<td>10,373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEST SIDE</td>
<td>10,782</td>
<td>25,892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>17,723</td>
<td>36,265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interest in the past two years. Of this past season, in the area known as the Upper Grand River Flats, one Baton Rouge hunter wrote: “This past season was one of the best mallard and wood duck seasons I have ever enjoyed in this area. Mallards enjoyed the potholes and were there by the hundreds. One of the largest wood duck concentrations I have ever witnessed populated this area this past season.

“Species of ducks that use this area are mallards, scaup, ring-necks, pintails, teal, canvassback, wood ducks, and a few baldpate. The species which concentrate here depend entirely upon water levels which vary from season to season. Limits of mallards and wood ducks are the rule rather than the exception.”

The upper portion of the Basin has been called by some the “world’s largest green tree reservoir”. The natural pattern of wetting and drying permits the hardwoods to survive and prosper, regularly bringing forth a crop of mast which the overflow water permits waterfowl to harvest. Nature thus duplicates here the “green tree reservoir” system which Arkansas duck clubs maintain artificially.

The wetting and drying, too, produces a variety of plant and animal foods which ducks utilize.

Hunting pressure, according to ORRRC, will increase 30 per cent by 1976 and more than 80 per cent by the year 2000.

In Louisiana alone 106,000 duck stamps were sold in one year recently.

Louisiana is one of the nation’s great states in commercial fish production, and the Basin supplies a substantial share of this huge harvest of aquatic edibles.

Almost nine million pounds of fish were taken from the Basin by commercial fishermen in 1962. Almost five million pounds of this was the delectable catfish, which goes to tables throughout Louisiana and the nation.

Buffalo, carp, garfish, bowfin, paddlefish, and freshwater drum (gaspergou) are taken in quantity.

That the Basin has undeveloped potential for exploitation of commercial species is undeniable. During a study conducted by L. S. U. in 1961 and 1962 for instance, it was found that striped mullet were one of the most abundant species present during most of the year. Commercial fishermen catch them in quantity but do not utilize them commercially, yet this fish is the third most valuable food fish in the South.

The striped mullet, I should add, must have access to marine waters where it spawns.

Huge quantities of catfish find their way into markets all over the country. Here, two commercial dealers examine some of the fine catfish for which the Atchafalaya Basin area is famous.

July-August, 1963
Crawfish from Louisiana are highly-sought in national markets. Tens upon tens of thousands of pounds are shipped each year from the Atchafalaya Basin area. They are also highly sought for family consumption by Louisianians.

Last year one dealer bought 700,000 pounds of fish and crawfish from commercial fishermen in the Basin.

In addition to the direct income to the area from the sale of fish, this industry touches other segments of the population who minister to fishermen. Net knitting and boat building annually bring a hundred thousand dollars to the individuals around the Basin skilled in these arts.

Crawfish and crawfishing is a unique phenomena that is synonymous with south Louisiana, and which reaches its pinnacle in the Basin. A curiosity in most parts of the nation, utilized only for fish bait, the “mudbug” of cajun country reaches such size and quality that it has become one of the most succulent of epicurean dishes.

As bisque, etuffe, and stew the crawfish is in its most respectable dress, but the “crawfish boil” remains one of the highlights of the good life in south Louisiana. Hundreds of thousands of people move into the overflow waters at the right time in spring, have a wonderful day’s outing running their nets, and immensely enjoy the hundreds of thousands of pounds of crawfish which they harvest.

No concrete statistics on the “sport” production of crawfish can be obtained, since no license is required to “crawfish” and there is no limit on the take. Evidence of the magnitude of the recreational activity, however, is readily available for anyone who cares to drive through crawfish country when the mudbugs are running. Autos line the roads in favored spots, with whole families swarming into the shallow waters in a most wholesome, profitable activity.

The bulk of the commercial production of crawfish comes from the Basin, taken by commercial fishermen in deepwater crawfish traps. There are at least 30 crawfish buyers who depend upon the production of the Atchafalaya floodway, and they bought more than five million pounds of crawfish from the Basin in 1962. Breaux Bridge in the hub of the Basin, is called the “Crawfish Capitol of the World”.

In addition to fish and crawfish there are other important resources of the Basin which provide food and/or income for residents of the area. The bullfrog, for instance, provides food, sport and income, and reaches its maximum in abundance and quality in this Basin. Here again it is difficult to determine annual harvest, since there is no daily limit during the 10-month long season.

We do know, however, that dealers bought from commercial froggers more than a hundred thousand pounds of frogs taken in the Basin in 1962.

Another resource which would be unfamiliar to residents of most regions of the nation is turtle catching. The main ingredient for countless bowls of turtle soup comes from the waters of the floodway each year, and in the process puts thousands of dollars into the economic circles of the area.

In 1962 almost a quarter of a million pounds of turtle meat brought $40,429.92 to fishermen in the Basin.

Another aspect of “turtling” is the taking of “baby” green turtles for sale as pets and novelties, which is even a bigger business than is catching them for food. More than nine million were taken in the Basin in 1962, returning $68,195.70 to the fishermen.

Another kind of “food” from the Basin which went to mink ranchers in the north was nutria meat—439,581 pounds of it last year.

The documented production of all kinds of fish and food from the Basin in 1962 amounted to a whopping 15 million pounds, which returned to fishermen of the area $2,627,937.87.

This, I should emphatically add, is a most conservative listing, since there is unquestionably a substantial harvest which goes unreported.

Although the Louisiana trapping industry has declined from the abnormal peak of the mid-forties, it still brings to the trappers a substantial sum of about four million dollars annually. Nu-

Baby green turtles form an interesting and economically important industry in the Atchafalaya Basin area. Highly sought by pet shop dealers, tens of thousands are taken each year from the vast basin area.
The parishes are the principal fur bearers taken. The nine parishes largely affected by the Atchafalaya Basin represent one-fourth of the State’s fur economy, or an income to trappers of some one million dollars each year on the average.

The case is made, therefore, that this huge area is usually productive of a great array of fish and wildlife. It is indisputable that the Basin now provides tremendous amounts of recreation, and that its potential in this respect has scarcely been tapped.

The tragic prospect, however, is that much of this may disappear before the onslaught of a plan of “improvement” for the Atchafalaya Basin now embarked upon by the U. S. Corps of Engineers.

The annual overflow from the Atchafalaya River into the three floodways—Morganza, West Atchafalaya, and Atchafalaya Basin—is depositing silt at an alarming rate, according to the Corps, greatly reducing the capacity of these floodways to carry water when they are needed to do so. To counteract this process the Corps’ plan of improvement calls for: 1. development of a main channel through the basin by dredging; 2. confinement of moderate floodflows to a main channel by closures of outlets along the main channel to the maximum degree possible; 3. extension of both the east and west Atchafalaya River levees further downstream; and 4. maintenance of all segments of presently authorized navigation projects within the basin.

The aim of the Corps, in short, is to stop the overflow which is responsible for production of such superb, varied wildlife. Their “improvements” would end the annual inundation which has, throughout recorded history, made this bottomland one of the most interesting and productive in the world.

For almost a decade the Wild Life and Fisheries Commission has been protesting such a course of action, with such statements as: “The anticipated channel closures will block outlets to the main stem of the Atchafalaya River and further reduce backwater effect and limit overflow conditions. This will have a harmful effect upon the sport and commercial fisheries for which this area is so famous. The channel closures will eliminate small boat access and prevent or greatly hamper public utilization of this area’s recreational potential” . . . “With the reduction of overflow more or less stable water conditions will prevail through the basin, and this will bring about conditions which favor rapid growth of undesirable aquatic plants” . . . “The elimination of overflow conditions in the floodway will lead to a rapid encroachment of agriculture, residential, and industrial interests. This will obviously reduce or eliminate this area’s value as fish and wildlife habitat and importance as a public recreational and commercial fishing area” . . . “The reduction of sedimentation of the lower floodway would reduce the ponding of water and reduce the creation of additional waterfowl areas.”

Of the additional silt load moving down the River into the Gulf the Commission says; “Mudflats will be built up over a wide area, this will cause a higher turbidity in the coastal waters of St. Mary, Iberia, and Vermilion parishes. Because of a westerly longshore current sedimentation will be widespread over the coastal bottoms of the parishes”.

The enormous productivity of fish and wildlife of the Basin is indisputably tied to the periodic flooding and de-watering, and it will certainly end when the annual inundation ends.

The fur industry of the Basin will drop drastically, since all types of furbearers trapped in the area are completely dependent upon deep water swamps and marsh conditions for their well being.

In predicting the reduction in value of this resource we are on firm ground, for we have before us the concrete examples which have oc-
Fishermen shown are examining a fine catch of bass taken from one of the many highly productive sport fishing areas in the Atchafalaya Basin.

curred here in this same Basin. In the past two decades, as the Corps plan of confining the floodflows to the River eliminated inundation or altered its degree and duration in the upper parts of the Basin, the superb resources have withered and died.

The spectacular fishing and hunting found in the vicinity of Keith Lake, Burton's Lake, Second Lake, Swayze Lake, Bayou Courtbrou, Bayou Fordoche, Bayou Duquesne, Red Cross, Lake Holloway, Little and Big Alabamas, Bay Denny and Bayou Desglaises back in the forties progressively disappeared as the levees along the Atchafalaya River were extended farther south, eliminating or altering the annual flooding.

In addition to the levee extensions there have already been closures of several major stream outlets into the Basin.

The Bay Denny area, which provided superb duck hunting in the forties, is no longer hunt-able.

The activity and interest of hunters and fishermen—both sport and commercial—has moved southward in the Basin as the Corps progressively altered water cycles from north to south.

Despite a mandate from Congress that it give full consideration to wildlife and recreation in its projects, in the Atchafalaya Basin the Corps has utterly failed to do so. In September of 1955 the Corps held a hearing on the “Proposed Plan for Increasing the Flow Capacity of the Lower Atchafalaya Basin”, at which wildlife interests outlined their fears. The hearing was obviously a waste of time, since the Corps has made no effort since then to devise methods of accomplishing flood control objectives and overcome the detrimental wildlife effects of their actions.

In October of 1962 another hearing was held in Port Allen. The purpose, to quote the notice from the Corps, was “to determine whether any modification of the existing plan of improvement for the Atchafalaya Basin is advisable at this time, with particular reference to the matter of access channels for boats between the East and West Atchafalaya Basin protection levees and the Atchafalaya Main Basin Channel, and the provision of fresh water for fish and wildlife purposes”.

The notice further stated: “Sponsors of improvements are requested to state the size of channel, the route desired, the type, size and amount of waterway traffic that would use the proposed channel, the present route used by this traffic, and the estimated benefits (savings) expressed in dollars per year that would result from the provision of the channel. Proponents of channel to provide fresh water with or without navigation are also requested to state the need and benefits from such an improvement.”

At this hearing the Wildlife Management Institute pointed out the absurdity of the situation, saying: “We are not engineers and do not consider ourselves qualified to make such studies as would be necessary to provide such information. This is a function of the Corps. Yet, as we understand it, the Corps has not yet completed its own model studies of the project. How then can anyone make an intelligent proposal regarding this project if the project itself is not yet firm?”

The Louisiana Wildlife Federation said: “The model test result on the channel development of the Atchafalaya River conducted by Corps in Vicksburg, involving at least four alternate sets of closure sites in combination with two alternate levee extensions, have yet to be made available—yet, we have a public hearing while the public is kept in the dark ... the public and agencies are asked to recommend modifications to various alternate plans which determine the water cycle without knowing what the water cycle is with each of the alternates. It is impossible to submit modifications to unknowns. It is unfair and unintelligent to have a public hearing under these conditions.”

Compounding the problem of those interested in preservation of the wildlife, esthetic, wilderness attributes of the Basin is this fact: we are immediately assailed as being for these things
in preference to saving lives and property from flooding. It is just not cricket to question the wisdom of the construction agencies of the Federal Government.

But you should! You have a right and a duty to expect full documentation of the need and desirability of the various "improvements" which are destroying resources in the guise of the "public good"... and with your tax millions.

When the present flood control plan for the Mississippi-Atchafalaya was devised the Corps obviously did not foresee the present "crisis" caused by siltation in the Basin. If they were fallible at that time, isn't it just possible that they are equally fallible now in insisting that channel closure and dredging is the only way to solve the present problem?

A key point which cannot be over-emphasized is that civilization will rapidly move into the Basin just as soon as the Corps completes its announced intention of preventing it from flooding. Land will be cleared for farming and grazing, and homes will be built within the floodway.

We will have the incongruous, contradictory spectacle of a vast area designed to carry flood-waters being protected from flooding. Assuming the integrity of the Corps in deeming this protection necessary to insure the integrity of the Basin as a floodway, this protection from flooding will be a tremendous financial boon to land owners within the floodway.

The land is all privately owned, and on much of it the Corps does not even have flood easements. It has followed the amazing policy of doing nothing about the lands in the lower portion of the Basin because of the present day complications of getting easements, in favor of future litigation when—IF—the floodway is ever used.

This is manifestly unfair both to land owners within the Basin and to the public who foots the bill and who depends upon the Corps projects for flood protection.

Development within the floodway is encouraged by the practice of the Corps not getting easements, and by their protection (regardless of the purpose) of the floodway from flooding. Since 1955 over 360 new homes and other buildings have been built within the floodway.

It is inevitable that land owners who have made substantial development within the floodway will resist to the fullest the use of the Basin for flood control—ever.

The New Madrid floodway in Missouri, which costs the government $6,500,000 was last used during the 1937 flood. According to the Wildlife Management Institute, it is doubtful that it ever will be used for that purpose again.

The Bonnet Carre spillway—another integral part of the lower Mississippi Flood control plan, could not be used again until Lake Pontchartrain levees have been improved considerably at a substantial cost.

These instances are cited only to show that flood control projects can lose their usefulness if other considerations—such as real estate development—crop up.

As previously stated, the "project flood" of 3,000,000 cfs has never occurred. It's considerably larger than that of 1927, which triggered the vast flood control program of the Mississippi Valley.

In the 35 years since the inception of this flood control plan there have been countless upstream projects designed for flood control. Hundreds of dams have been built to hold the waters back, and watershed practices have increased the ability of the land to stop runoff.

Because of these projects, many by the Corps itself, a great number of responsible people believe that the "project flood" of three million cfs is unrealistic. They maintain that it will never occur.

If this is true the rape of the Atchafalaya Basin under pretext of flood control will be one of the great tragedies of America.

"We recognize fully the need for a completely implemented flood control program and the role it plays in the saving of human life", said the Wild Life and Fisheries Commission at the Port Allen hearing. "It is our earnest belief a new concept for flood control could be developed in which all aspects of planning and construction would be aimed at a multi-purpose use of all our natural resources rather than a plan which will accelerate the decline and eventual loss of an area so rich in fish and wildlife and recreational wealth."

The Commission recommends: 1. that the federal government give full consideration to the possibility of obtaining, by acquisition, in fee simple title lands comprising the project area and provide for their subsequent development for fish and wildlife, recreation and commercial purposes by federal, state and local interest for maximum public use; 2. that navigation access between the Atchafalaya Basin Protection Levees be maintained; 3. that in view of losses sustained in the past and to alleviate these conditions, specific structures be designed to furnish freshwater to depleted areas.

In this consideration we should point out that introduction of fresh water will not return an area to productivity unless it is sufficient to re-establish the pattern of substantial overflow followed by de-watering.

Another point which bears consideration is that the Corps is simply transferring a problem from one point to another when it seeks to stop deposition of silt within the floodway in favor of carrying it on downstream for deposition into the Gulf. While the very long-ranged effect—decades or centuries from now—may be beneficial in the formation of another delta similar to that of the Mississippi, the immediate—in our lifetime—effect can only be detrimental to the Gulf interests.

Closure of the outlets from the River into the floodway will be a physical barrier preventing movement from one area to another by boat,
which is the only practical method of transportation in this entire Basin. Not only will hunters, fishermen, and pleasure seekers suffer from this, but workers employed in the many oil fields within the Basin will find it impossible to reach the work sites once the closures are made.

There are 17 producing oil fields within the Basin, and only the regular overflow of vast quantities of fresh water from the Atchafalaya River has kept pollution from becoming a problem. A total of 2,817,870 barrels of brine are produced from these oil fields each month. About 1,161 barrels are re-injected into the ground, but the remaining 2,816,609 barrels of brine are disposed of by natural drainage or evaporation pits. This is a sizeable quantity of brine, but prospects are that as these oil fields age the proportion of brine produced will become substantially greater. The outlook, in short, is for more brine—not less.

Closure of the River outlets will inevitably result in a progressive pollution buildup. By depriving these backwater areas of overflow the dilution will be sharply reduced. By completely leveeing the main channel the brines will be contained in the immediate vicinity of discharge, building up concentrations.

To sum up, there are many, many obvious detrimental effects of the program the Corps now has in progress and in prospect for the Atchafalaya Basin. The only one in its favor is the Corps contention that only this approach will accomplish the desired flood control goals.

I submit that the Corps has an obligation to investigate—thoroughly—every conceivable alternative which could accomplish a multi-purpose development of the Atchafalaya Basin, for flood control, navigation, hunting, fishing, boating, and other forms of recreation, without destroying the irreplaceable natural resources of this superb area.

The request of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation at the Port Allen hearing deserves firm and immediate consideration: "We request that a comprehensive plan for the development of the whole Atchafalaya River Basin, including associated estuarine waters, be prepared for estimated need in the year 1976 and the year 2000, with flood control, navigation and fish and wildlife (recreation) as equal beneficiaries of this plan. We respectfully request that our Congressional delegation in Washington, D. C. sponsor legislation to spell this out as federal policy."

The announced aim of the present administration in Washington is to create new "wilderness" areas for the future well-being of our mushrooming population. It is inconceivable, in view of this, that we should be on the verge of seeing one of the best destroyed.

* * *

Conservation Pledge

I give my pledge as an American to save and faithfully to defend from waste the natural resources of my country—its soil and minerals, its forests, waters and wildlife.

Reprinted from The LOUISIANA CONSERVATIONIST

July-August, 1963
Atchafalaya Basin
Commercial Products

Commercial products from the Atchafalaya Basin provide an important part of Louisiana’s general economy, moving to markets all over the United States. From this vast, almost wilderness area, come commercial fish, crawfish, fur, turtles and other species of wildlife. The products of the basin are highly in demand in markets of the country from Seattle to St. Louis, from Memphis to Michigan and Massachusetts.