Atchafalaya Basin Dispute Swirls

EDITOR'S NOTE — The Atchafalaya River basin has become the center of a complex controversy since several interest groups have asked that a large part of the basin be set aside as a public recreation area. Here are some representative viewpoints on the issue in the second of a two-part series.

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HENDERSON, La. (AP) — Before the McGee rock festival, last month on the banks of the Atchafalaya River, Louisianans were thinking about settling aside a place in the river basin to let the public enjoy the wilderness.

The Governor's Commission on the Atchafalaya meets Friday to decide on a single plan to develop a large part of the basin as a recreational area.

The alternative of the commission — conservationist, forester, landowner and sportsman alike — must agree on the plan.

Future Action
Gov. John J. McKeithen, when he established the commission in May, asked for recommendations on such an area. His decision would lend weight to a future course of action.

The basin is cut altogether closed to the public, but no specific area has been designated for public use.

Here are some viewpoints of persons or organizations represented on the 24-member commission:

B. F. M. Skerrett III, president of the Greater Atchafalaya Basin Council, a group representing 13 parishes in southern Louisiana, said his group has not been advocating "a federal takeover per se."

Surface Rights
"All we are trying to do is to control the surface rights to prevent deterioration and to preserve public use. The people who support private property rights have a different view. This is the American system," Skerrett said.

He said he'd like to see the state, rather than the federal government, assume control of such an area, but he said the state think the state has the money to spend.

Skerrett believes a federal recreational area protected by the supervision of the Department of Interior, is needed for three reasons:

Private Clubs
— Much land in the basin would in time be leased by private hunting and fishing clubs to the exclusion of others.

Dredge work by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is lowering the water level in the swamp.

And the federal government

Richard Yancey, assistant director of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, said the state could operate game management areas on strictly volunteer basis.

If the state bought the land, Yancey said, it would take hard put to find the money.

Land Purchases
"We've submitted budget requests for land purchases and ships of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation, he said.

The proposed recreation area would include 60 per cent of the basin.

The LFA fears a loss of timber rights. Much of the timber is in that area is in need of replanting, Yancey explained.

The LFA also questioned the importance of the land being wet or dry because of the abundance of fishing spots in the state. The question of public access was raised, however.

"The LFA fears the state will fail to maintain signs and develop the area," Skerrell said.

Charles Bosch, executive director of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation, said his group has "the greatest hardwood owners property in the state."

"I don't think this is the right way to save the basin," Bosch said. "What's there and what's there is the only one who can pay to save the basin from becoming another political and federally controlled area."

In the controversy comes the State of Louisiana which claims all of the areas that were navigable at the time of the state's admission to the Union in 1812. About 200,000 acres. That claim is a point of legal dispute.

State interest in parts of valuable mineral royalties. The basin provides about 10 per cent of the state's total natural gas production and about eight per cent of its oil production.

Good Idea
Dr. Leslie Glasgow, a commission member and LSU professor of forestry and wildlife, feels it is a good idea to save some part of the basin.

"It's the greatest hardwood swamp in North America," Glasgow said. "If it is filled up, you'll lose some of the big game and the fish."

It is a natural trend to switch from fishing use to game use, he added.

SUN OVER ATCHAFALAYA BASIN — Fishermen enjoy a warm sun as they cast in Buffalo Cove in the Atchafalaya River Basin. There is currently a controversy swirling over the proposed declaration of part of the basin as a public recreation area. (AP Wirephoto)