Basin Landowners Fighting for Property Rights

During the recent round of five public hearings held by the U.S. Corps of Engineers on their plans for the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway these lines of thought have come forth loud and clear. First, the landowners, the hunting clubbers who lease the lands and their friends fully support the Corps flood control plan.

Secondly, this same allied group totally opposes Gov. Treen's real estate plan for the basin which the Corps is using as part of their overall plan. And finally, the environmentalists and some of their bureaucratic friends in state and federal government support above all else, public access to the privately owned lands in the basin and expropriation of some of the lands for public use. They also oppose a proposed extension of the Avoca Island levee below Morgan City.

This levee is planned to relieve backwater flooding in the Morgan City area. The ecologists say its construction would cut down water flows into the marshes and cause damage to those wetlands. Of all the voices heard at the hearings those of the landowners and hunting clubbers seemed to get the best reception from the general public for the contents of their talks had messages that people could relate to.

On the other hand, try as they may, the environmentalists could not find any way to correlate the need for public access to private lands with flood control. What has public access and expropriation of private property got to do with flood control? That is what the landowners and their friends asked and to this day that question remains unanswered. However, the thoughts expressed by some of the landowners were well taken and well heard.

Perhaps no one said it more clearly or more eloquently than John Stockstill, who was born in the basin at the village of Bayou Chene.

"The most awesome part about it all to me is that it took three generations for my grandfather, my father and myself to achieve what we have in the Atchafalaya Basin and they give me five minutes to defend it." Another basin landowner, Wade Burdin, of Lafayette evidently believed in fighting fire with fire when he said of the environmentalists who are supporting the Treen real estate plan, "...These people have not the courage, the honor or the industry to go out and put the fires out that they want to enjoy. They, like leeches, want it to be given to them at the expense of honorable, productive, taxpaying citizens. To attain this and they would destroy the basic rights upon which the country was founded, the right of free enterprise and the right to private property.

But of the Corps flood control plan Mr. Burdin said, "I support the flood control plan of the Corps of Engineers with any changes which the passage of time may require. Treen's ridiculous plan (the real estate plan) is so absurd, abusive and confiscatory that it does not merit discussion.

Professional photographer and hunting club member, Ory Miguez, of Franklin also got right to the point when he expressed his opinion of the Corps' proposed real estate plan, saying... "...I am strongly opposed to the proposed Treen Green Belt Plan. I don't understand how a man who was elected governor of the State of Louisiana could come up with such an idiotic plan."

The green belt, a proposed system of 300 foot wide strips of land adjoining the banks of each waterway that would be put under public access easements in the Treen plan, were a definite thorn in the side to hunting clubbers and landowners alike.

Mrs. George Wilbert of Plaquemine said, "I am disappointed in and opposed to the governor's green belt plan. To take lands already furnishing recreation, from one group of people to give another is wrong and totally unnecessary. Can't private enterprise furnish recreation? When did it become the policy of the state to take property for tourism? These green belt areas mean loss of access and control of one's property. This can endanger the lives of those who work in the basin. Yes, some do have to work!"

Speaking at the final public hearing at the Rivergate in New Orleans, Franklin housewife, Paula Slaw, who said she represented herself and her family drew a great deal of response from the audience when her speech was interrupted by applause on six occasions.

She strongly supported the Avoca Island levee extension and called the U.S. Fish and Wildlife proposal of a system of ring levees to protect the villages of Amelia, Belle River, Pierre Part, Bayou Pigeon and Bayou Sorrell as "egg-head plans."

She asked how the people would move from village to village during flood season. "Would Treen furnish them with Louisiana's first mass transit system, a system of ferry boats traveling from one village to the other? Would he call it the Treen Marine Plan?"

Mrs. Slaw made her position on the entire real estate package quite clear when she said, "My family has been in the Atchafalaya Basin for seven generations. We have voluntarily let the Corps use our lands for flood control for approximately the past fifty years without compensation in order to give the public protection from flooding.

And now after these fifty years, the governor of this state wants to expropriate our property and property rights because a handful of environmentalists want to turn our property into a public romping ground at the expense of us, the property owners who have paid the taxes and maintained these properties for the past hundred years."

She said she opposed "every aspect of the real estate plan." and added, ..."...and before we sit back and have the government expropriate our properties we intend to go into litigation. If we have to, we will stay in court until the bottom of Six Mile Lake reaches the same elevation as the front lawn of the governor's mansion in Baton Rouge."

Many spectators attending the hearings this time around felt that the landowners and their supporters really got their point across and had gained the upper hand in the Atchafalaya Basin controversy because they now had the overwhelming support of the public.

The many thousands of letters that have poured into the Corps offices in support of private ownership in the basin along with the general support of flood control may help to settle this lengthy dispute once and for all.