Very little said accomplished on basin plan

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LAFAYETTE — Nine years ago, a plethora of state and federal agencies came up with a plan to control the preservation and use of the Atchafalaya Basin.

With the 10th anniversary of the plan approaching, very little has been accomplished, environmentalists say.

The Sierra Club sponsored a public hearing Thursday for an update on the plan.

Sam Collier, a member of the Sierra Club's southeast field staff, said the club is trying to hold government agencies accountable for their parts in the plan.

Collier did stop short, however, of saying that the lead agency in implementing the plan, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, has dropped the ball.

"They do need to speed up," Collier said of the corps work in the basin. "They need to speed up greatly."

The corps responsibility in the plan is to buy land from landowners for public use, and to sign easement agreements with private landowners. The easement agreements have the government paying landowners to observe restrictions on development and use.

Charles Fryling Jr., a representative of the local Sierra Club, said some aspects of the plan, like the water management units, will be ruined if the corps "doesn't get it in gear."

"Delay curtails management options because of rapid siltation," Fryling said. "The economically important recreational and commercial fisheries aspects of the basin are dependent upon the proper management of the basin's waters."

Marie Withmeyer, with the corps' New Orleans office, said her agency feels the plan is proceeding on schedule.

"We feel like, with having to start over, that we're on time," Withmeyer said. "If we are behind, we hope we can make up for any time that was lost."

Part of the problem is that the Corps work was delayed for nearly two years when the plan was revamped in 1990, Withmeyer said.

At that time, the type of land the corps was purchasing was re-examined. Now, the corps is purchasing higher-quality land that will have a greater environmental impact, Withmeyer said.

"If we hadn't stopped for almost two years, of course we'd be farther along," she said. "But our target date is 2013 and we feel that we can meet that."

The corps also has the responsibility to build boat launches, campgrounds and other facilities to help citizens enjoy the parts of the basin that are public property. The corps started construction on the first of those facilities, a boat launch, this month, Withmeyer said.

John Ellis with the Jean Lafitte section of the service said his agency is considering several alternatives, the most promising of which is a group of visitor centers throughout the basin to encourage visitors and to teach citizens about the basin.

Thursday's meeting was the first of two. The second will be held in Baton Rouge Thursday at the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries on Quail Drive. The hearing starts at 6:30 p.m. and is open to the public.