Basin water diversion plans on council agenda

By Wayne LeJeune
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NEW IBERIA - The Iberia Parish Council Wednesday will consider a resolution opposing potential plans by the U.S Army Corps of Engineers that opponents say could destroy Vermilion Bay.

The corps is conducting an eight-year study which includes four options for diverting water from the Atchafalaya Basin to the Gulf of Mexico in an effort to reduce potential flooding in Morgan City.

Two of those diversion options would lead to more freshwater and sediment being flushed from the basin into Vermilion Bay which is a major saltwater estuary for fish and shellfish.

The Iberia Industrial Development Foundation (IDF) has passed a resolution of opposition and the parish council's Public Health and Safety Committee also has passed a resolution of opposition.

The committee resolution scheduled for discussion at the full council meeting Wednesday not only opposes the Corps of Engineers' study but suggests construction of a seven mile rock jetty from the mouth of Wax Lake Outlet - locally called "the jaws" area into deeper waters of the Gulf.

The idea for a jetty came from Universal Fabricators owner Dallay Berard in a letter to Merlin Dupre, a member of the Coastal Planning Committee consulting with the Corps of Engineers.

Dupre received endorsement for the jetty solution last Wednesday from the Public Health and Safety Committee.

The Corps of Engineers has removed a rock weir above the Wax Lake Outlet which has increased flow from the Atchafalaya Basin into the Gulf. That increased flow is being carried by westward tides into the Gulf.

The flow is directed towards the Vermilion Bay. The corps won't implement a diversion plan for at least eight years but Dupre warned the council committee that more bay areas will become heavily silted in the mean time.

IDF president John Zimmer echoed Dupre's assessment of the situation at a recent IDF meeting.

"You can see it now," Zimmer said. "The sediment flowing into Vermilion Bay is turning the water into the color of chocolate milk. And just ask any of the commercial fishermen about the amount of freshwater coming in."

Dr. Donald Pavy, Coastal Restoration chairman for Iberia Parish, also has opposed the corps' study.

"These options the corps is talking about are not something that parishes surrounding the bay can live with," Pavy said. "I know the jetty structure to bring that water out into the Gulf will costs millions, perhaps 100s of million of dollars, but Vermilion Bay is worth billions of dollars through the years."

"Losing the shrimping and commercial fishing industries would be catastrophic," he said.

Pavy understands the corps is trying to save Morgan City through its water diversion study but suggested it might be a futile attempt.

"Trying to save Morgan City through dredging and levees won't work in my opinion," Pavy said. "In the long run the corps will just have to buy out Morgan City because it will eventually go under."

"The problem is that Congress dedicates what happens. We have a situation where politicians are telling engineers what to do," he said. "Maybe we need to be like the Dutch in Europe where the engineers (the experts) tell the politicians what needs to be done."