Atchafalaya Basin Center Of Complex, Vigorous Dispute

L'il Abner used to say it, "It's confusin' but not amusin' " and even the most casual observer of the legislative scene in Baton Rouge is aware of the confusion that exists these days in capitol halls. Not the least of these entangled situations is that of the Atchafalaya Basin where two opposing sides have lined up in a power struggle of rhetoric, resolutions and razzle-dazzle.

The issue boils down to this: proponents want the Basin, termed the last remaining semi-wilderness area in the United States, to be a federally supervised National Recreation Area. In this endeavor, they have the blessing of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation, the Goals for Louisiana Program, the Greater Atchafalaya Basin Council, and numerous sportsmen and conservationists throughout the state. Gov. McKeithen has said if the area were to become such a refuge, "the citizens of the state would greatly benefit from the recreational and educational facilities which would be developed there and from the tourist trade which would result from the development."

On the other hand, basin landowners express concern that a "federal take-over" could put them out of business. They fear that they may no longer be permitted to cut timber, drill for oil, plant soybeans, that flood control will be hampered, and hunting and fishing curtailed. They say, in short, nobody has a right to give to the federal government lands owned by the state and private landowners. They claim they're just as interested in ecology as anybody else and that they don't need federal interference.

Proponents say none of this is so, that timber and oil interests will not be impeded, mineral rights will not be disturbed, that a National Recreation Area is not like a National Park. In a National Recreation Area, regulations are worked out between the government and private property owners. THEY say, in short, their only objectives are to keep the basin in timber and to keep it open to the public.

Opponents asked the governor to kill any plans for a federal recreation district in the basin. Proponents asked the governor to give the idea a chance, and see what could be worked out. They were successful in doing this and that is where the matter now stands.

The governor's newly appointed basin commission will study all angles of the proposal, come up with options and alternatives, and present its conclusions to the legislature. It was only last year during the regular session that the Louisiana Senate and House concurrently resolved to endorse to Congress the creation of the Atchafalaya Basin for use as a National Recreation Area.

Since then, however, opposition has mounted and legislators are caught between two forces that feel as strongly about this issue as any friend or foe of the Domed Stadium. It would be much better if a compromise were reached between the principals, rather than have the entire matter wind up in litigation that could go on for years and benefit nobody.