Business Interests Fear Atchafalaya Park Concept

Money Men Discuss Proposal in Lafayette

(Special to The Times-Picayune)

LAFAYETTE, La.—Creation of a national recreation area in part of the Atchafalaya Basin could mean unprecedented restrictions on commercial interests operating within the basin, according to Hugh Brown, member of the Land and Royalty Owners of Louisiana (LAROLA), who said he got his information from the National Parks Service.

Brown was among the dozen or so men with commercial interests in the basin who spoke at a weekend meeting in Lafayette. The meeting of landowners was called by LAROLA to report facts developed regarding proposed national recreation area in the Atchafalaya Basin. About 100 showed up for the gathering.

Brown, one of the three-man team of landowners who recently met in Richmond, Va., with representatives of the National Parks Service to gather information pertaining to the creation of a national recreation area in the basin, expressed concern over the possibilities of federal government interference with oil and timber interests in the basin.

These interests would be restricted, despite statements to the contrary by proponents of the national recreation area, Brown said, citing statements by Dr. Leslie Glasgow, former undersecretary of the U.S. Interior Department, and B. E. M. Skerrett, president of the Greater Atchafalaya Basin Council.

POLICIES QUOTED

Brown, land manager for Williams, Inc., lumber company, from Patterson, told the group why he is afraid federal hands in the basin would mean restrictions on commercial ventures. Quoting from a U.S. Interior Department and National Parks Service book, entitled “Administrative Policies for Recreation Areas of the National Park System,” Brown read:

“Within national recreation areas outdoor recreation shall be recognized as the dominant or primary resource management purpose. If additional natural resource utilization is carried on, such additional use shall be compatible with fulfilling the recreation mission, and none will be carried on that is significantly detrimental to it.”

Several landowners stated they are interested in conservation of the basin and its resources, but expressed doubt at the need for and desirability of federal involvement in preserving the basin as a semi-wilderness area.

“We can’t tolerate federal control because we’re afraid we’ll lose our land,” one man said.

LAROLA president Earl Willis of St. Martinville said he has been unable to determine exactly what proponents of the national recreation area are planning. He said he has heard, but is not sure of it, that proponents are seeking one-half million acres for the national area.

David Dodenhoff, executive director of LAROLA, of New Orleans, said landowners’ representatives have been having difficulty in getting answers and hard facts and figures from Glasgow pertaining to the national recreation area.

Dodenhoff expressed skepticism at the accuracy of Glasgow’s assurance that commercial interests could continue operating in the basin as they have in the past, should a national recreation area be created.

CALL OFF EFFORTS

Several legislators have tried yet failed, to have passed through the state legislature a resolution asking the governor to call off his efforts to have a national recreation area established in the basin, Dodenhoff said.

State Rep. Esper Marionneaux Jr. of Livonia told the group that those with commercial interests in the basin are doing more now than ever before to save the basin from adverse ecological changes. He expressed hope that the state — instead of the federal government — could find ways and means to preserve the basin for recreational uses.

“Let’s let the state of Louisiana develop those lands that belong to the state. . . . Let’s use the state-owned properties” for recreational purposes, he advocated.

It is Marionneaux who authored the House Concurrent Resolution in the past legislative session asking that the governor cease in his push for a national recreation area. The resolution, according to Marionneaux, also sought assurance to property owners that all their personal property rights — not only mineral and timber rights — would be protected in the event of a national recreation area being established in the basin. The bill failed.

E. A. Courtney, LAROLA member who presided at the opening of the meeting, told the group a concerted effort is being made to have the national recreation area established. The idea is being supported by Gov. John McKeithen, the Louisiana Legislature, the Greater Atchafalaya Basin Council and numerous sports and conservation-minded organizations, he said.

Sportsmen are “justifiably concerned” with the fact that siltation is changing the topography of the land, he said, adding that landowners are “just as concerned.”

Bill Miller, LAROLA member from Lafayette, said he has been told by people in the oil industry that federal restrictions in the basin would cause them “to look elsewhere” for production.

Miller said he wrote the U.S. Interior Department during June and asked several questions on the specific effects a national recreation area would have on various aspects of the commercial interests operating in the basin. He told the group he has not received a reply to his letter, but will make public the department’s answers to his questions when he receives a reply.