Businesses in limbo
Possible land buys in the Atchafalaya Basin by corps has some worried

Barbara L. Nelson
bnelson@theadvertiser.com

HENDERSON — The party could be over in another part of the Atchafalaya Basin if the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is allowed to buy up a substantial amount of privately owned land south of Interstate 10. The Louisiana Department of Natural Resources in March asked Congress to lift a mandated cap on the amount of land the corps can purchase in the Basin from 50,000 acres to 65,000 acres. The corps currently owns 47,000 acres.

The little-known request could affect nearly 15 businesses in the area that cater to thousands of partying tourists; the nearly 400 homeowners and hunters who lease property there; and the people who hunt and fish south of I-10.

Last year, the St. Martin Land Co. offered to sell to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between 11,000 and 12,000 acres south of I-10 between the east- and west-guide levees to Butte La Rose. That request would exceed the amount of land the corps can own under the current law by about 9,000 acres.

The Martin-owned parcels of land are not contiguous, but other landowners south of I-10 will be asked if they'll sell their land, too, said Deanna Walker of the corps real estate division.

The current land cap was mandated in 1985 when the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway System, Louisiana Project was authorized by Congress to prevent the federal government from grabbing more land and then absolutely necessary to control flood waters.

The legislation also stipulated that the corps could only purchase land from people who were willing to sell.

In the 1970s, the Basin was to become part of the National Park system, according to Randy Lacott, executive director of National Wildlife Federation. The landowners woke up one morning and read the cap was to give assurance to private landowners that they wouldn't be pressured to sell their land.

A decision by Congress on the new land cap is expected this fall, said Walker.

The cap was to give assurance to private landowners that they wouldn't be pressured to sell their land.

Barbara L. Nelson, executive director of National Wildlife Federation, said, "The landowners woke up one morning and read in the paper that there was a proposal for a national park in the Basin," Lacott said. "They were scared to death of the feds coming in and buying up the land. It was the line in the sand."

The Martin-owned land was right in the middle of Basin's floodway. That request could affect nearly 15 businesses in the area to be sold.

The corps has quietly purchased land before, when it bought up 10,000 acres north of I-10 last November. The move caused an outcry from angry business owners, hunters and area residents after the corps failed to tell anyone until posting flyers on the day of the sale.

Hunting in the area was temporarily halted until corps officials could make an assessment of the land.

"Anybody that was leasing from St. Martin Land Co.—their leases were extinguished," Walker said.

More than 150 private camps also are located in the newest developed areas of Butte La Rose, she said. An easement would prevent the land from being further developed.

In the 1990s, the corps needed land to expand the spillway to funnel water when the Mississippi River overflowed. That land was right in the middle of Bayou Chenal, which was home to 500 people.

The town no longer exists. The Corps of Engineers, sooner or later will have it all," said Earl "To-Bit" Patin, Mayor of Henderson. "It might not affect the town, but it surely will affect the hunters and the sports fisherman, if there are more regulations."

THE DAILY ADVERTISER
LAFAYETTE, LA

Dated: 8-5-02
Sec: A
Pg: 1
Col: 2

Continued from Page 1A

The West Atchafalaya Protection levee, near the town of Henderson, is a yardstick of how the land is used by tourists. The levee is an Unidentified Structure and the corps will have to discuss.

The corps has quietly purchased land before, when it bought up 10,000 acres north of I-10 last November. The move caused an outcry from angry business owners, hunters and area residents after the corps failed to tell anyone until posting flyers on the day of the sale.

Hunting in the area was temporarily halted until corps officials could make an assessment of the land.

"Anybody that was leasing from St. Martin Land Co.—their leases were extinguished," Walker said.

More than 150 private camps also are located in the newest developed areas of Butte La Rose, she said. An easement would prevent the land from being further developed.

In the 1990s, the corps needed land to expand the spillway to funnel water when the Mississippi River overflowed. That land was right in the middle of Bayou Chenal, which was home to 500 people.

The town no longer exists. The Corps of Engineers, sooner or later will have it all," said Earl "To-Bit" Patin, Mayor of Henderson. "It might not affect the town, but it surely will affect the hunters and the sports fisherman, if there are more regulations."