By MIKE HASTEN
State Editor
BATON ROUGE — Almost $320 million has been approved by Congress to improve flood protection in the Atchafalaya Basin, to dredge the main river channel and to purchase land for recreation areas in the basin.

At a news conference here Friday, U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston said the funds were approved by the Senate Thursday in the appropriations bill.

Johnston labeled Thursday “a very good day for Louisiana” as it received the Atchafalaya Basin funds, $700 million in a dispute with the federal government over offshore oil and gas leases and about $380 million for dredging the Mississippi River.

President Reagan has threatened to veto the river funds but Johnston said congressmen are fighting to keep the projects. “The funds for the basin are ‘part of the overall plan by the Corps,’” Johnston said. “But we’ve got a long way to go on the project.”

Those plans include dredging the river to improve flow and combat siltation and to build up the levees. Most of the levee work will be done in the Morgan City area where flooding poses the biggest hazards. “Morgan City is in deep trouble,” he said.

In past years, businesses all along the river in St. Mary Parish have flooded as the water in the river rises and winds blow water back up the river from the Gulf of Mexico.

Siltation in the basin has built up large sand bars and islands in what was once open water. Siltation also has slowed the flow of water into the Gulf, causing the build-up of a delta along the coast.

Johnston said he believes dredging work on the Atchafalaya will begin next year but completion of the several hundred million dollar project is “a long way off.”

On the $700 million settlement, known as 8-g because of the section of offshore leases involved, Johnston said he believes settling for 27.5 percent of the funds “is a good compromise.”

The royalties portion of the dispute has not yet been settled but it should not be too much of a problem, he said.

Johnston is the ranking Democrat on the Senate Energy Committee, which is to work out the details of the settlement.

Louisiana should receive the funds this fall, he said, after the details of the bill are completed.

On the Mississippi River Dredging project, Johnston said the Corps will dredge the river from Baton Rouge to the Gulf to improve conditions for river traffic and flow.