Corps offers no Atchafalaya relief

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NEW ORLEANS — Residents and business owners in Morgan City and Berwick are watching the Atchafalaya River rise to record levels this spring, but the only help they'll get is sandbags.

A U.S. senator, a congressman, Gov. Edwin Edwards and other officials huddled with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' representatives here Saturday to seek help from the corps to lessen the chance of flooding along the Atchafalaya.

The corps said there's nothing it can do.

Corps Brig. Gen. Eugene Witherspoon and Col. Michael Diffley, district commander of the corps' New Orleans office, said the corps can neither send less water from the Mississippi River into the swollen Atchafalaya nor cut back the Wax Lake Outlet weir to alleviate the problem.

The corps operates the Old River Control Structure northeast of Simmesport, which allows the corps to regulate the amount of Mississippi River water diverted into the Atchafalaya.

Diffley said the best short-term solution for flooding on the Atchafalaya is two-fold: "on-site flood proofing" and to hope there are no heavy rains in the saturated Midwest and snow-covered Northeast.

"We can't simply hope it doesn't rain," a frustrated U.S. Rep. Billy Tauzin, D-La., said during the meeting. "How do we get our feet dry real soon?"

Diffley said waging war "right there at the riverfront" is the best short-term answer.

"Technically, and money-wise, that's the way to fight the fight," Diffley said. "If I had a better technical solution for you, I'd lay it on the table."

Any long-term solution is at least a decade away and would easily cost more than $100 million, Diffley said. "If it was easy we wouldn't be sitting here," Witherspoon added.

Gov. Edwin Edwards said the situation in Morgan City and Berwick is serious, and he noted that two-thirds of the country is drained by the Mississippi and its tributaries.

"We're at the tail-end of a floodway that is designed"
to drain all of those areas,” Morgan City Mayor Tim Mott said of his town of 15,000.

For that reason, U.S. Sen. John Breaux, D-La., called the situation in Morgan City and Berwick a national problem that carries a national responsibility and said the rest of the country should help pay for a solution.

Mayor Emmett Hardaway of Berwick, population 4,000, said his community would be devastated if heavy rains push the river over the levee that encircles Berwick.

“We just can’t count on the weather and hope it doesn’t rain,” Breaux said.

Witherspoon, who said the long-term upriver forecast is for below normal rainfall, predicted the Atchafalaya should start to recede ever so slowly in Morgan City.

However, the weather forecast can change, he said.

Tauzin said the Atchafalaya is higher now than it was in March before the 1973 and 1983 floods.

“Every day in Morgan City we’re setting new records,” he said. “Any little rain right now complicates matters.”

Federal law requires 30 percent of the Mississippi’s flow to be diverted down the Atchafalaya at the Old River Control Structure, Witherspoon said.

Reducing that percentage to 20 percent would flood fields and property upriver along the Mississippi at a cost of about $1.3 million and almost certainly trigger lawsuits, he said.

The Wax Lake Outlet weir, completed in 1989, was designed to force water through Berwick Bay, thus scouring the channel and alleviating the need for constant dredging, Diffley said.

Tauzin said the weir’s more noticeable effect has been rapid and dramatic floods in backwaters north and east of Morgan City whenever the water rises.

That puts some companies out of business three months out of the year, he said, including dozens of riverfront businesses outside the flood walls in the Morgan City-Berwick area.

Many of the businesses are seriously considering relocating, Tauzin said.