Corps officer says plans can’t stop wetlands losses

By BILL McMATHON
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Although Louisiana officials ticked off dozens of approaches for saving the state’s wetlands, a U.S. Corps of Engineers officer Thursday charged the proposed projects can’t stop wetlands losses.

“I don’t believe we can” stop the loss of wetlands, Col. Richard V. Gorski said during a hearing called by Sen. J. Bennett Johnston on a proposal to levy a tax on offshore natural gas to support restoration of coastal marshes.

Gorski’s comments contrasted with state officials who cited dozens of methods for restoration and preservation of Louisiana’s coastal wetlands.

Gorski’s positions also conflicted with Johnston, who — along with Louisina Sen. John Breaux — has proposed a special “Wetlands Account” to be funded with mineral revenue from production on the Outer Continental Shelf.

Gorski said statements that solutions are available in halting the loss of wetlands are an “optimistic, perhaps arrogant position.”

Johnston is seeking congressional approval of a 2 cents per thousand cubic feet tax on natural gas produced from the federal Outer Continental Shelf — the production area beyond the state’s three-mile limit.

Most of that tax would be paid by users outside Louisiana, said Johnston, and would not cause a reduction in drilling and mineral exploration off Louisiana’s coast.

Only Jim Porter, president of Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association, opposed the proposed tax. The money would come from the general fund, he said.

In a hearing at the State Capitol, Gorski, state officials, environmentalists, professors and

Sen. J. Bennett Johnston

Porter outlined their positions on the Johnston proposal, which would yield an estimated $85 million to $100 million a year for wetlands preservation and restoration work.

Johnston asked state Department of Environmental Quality Secretary Paul Templet and Department of

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Wildlife and Fisheries Secretary Virginia Van Sickle whether the level of spending he proposes is feasible for the wetlands programs would provide the resources necessary.

Templet said the state has taken no position but, “I think it will work.”

Van Sickle responded: “Ditto.”

Gorski said his superiors in Washington have taken no position on Johnston’s measure dedicating the natural gas revenues.

The Corps official also questioned possible solutions to the loss of barrier islands, which included depositing of spoil on existing islands.

“We have not been able to design economically feasible projects to protect the barrier islands,” Gorski said.

And, pumping sand on the islands would be an ongoing solution, he said.

“Mother Nature wants to wash those islands,” Gorski said.

Johnston also asked Templet whether he agrees with the Corps assessment.

“Not normally,” the DEQ official said.

Templet said the Corps of Engineers feels bound by cost-benefit studies.

While Gorski argued that $1 billion to $4 billion might be needed to provide the diversion of Mississippi River flow and sediment to rebuild wetlands — an idea described by Van Sickle — Templet said the wetlands provide an annual $1 billion resource for Louisiana.

Templet cited as an example of coastal restoration that the Corps might increase the flow of the Mississippi River through the Old River Structure into the Atchafalaya River Basin where there is already a rebuilding of the coastline.

The DEQ secretary said a gradual diversion over a 10-year period from 30 percent to 50 percent of the Mississippi River’s flow, during high water stages, is a workable solution for rebuilding the coastline at the mouth of the Atchafalaya.

Tulane Professor Ralph Houck was critical of the Corps’ activities.

Of 60 million cubic yards of dredging to maintain channels, said Houck, “less than 19 percent has been used for marsh maintenance.”

Referring to President Bush’s promise for no net loss of wetlands, Houck said that position isn’t enough for Louisiana.

“We need a net gain policy in Louisiana,” he said.