DNR's Gomez still blocks dredging plans

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor

Though the state has given the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permission to dredge much of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, the Department of Natural Resources still is refusing to allow dredging in a section where the channel threatens to break through to Lake Borgne, DNR Secretary Ron Gomez said Friday.

Meanwhile, state officials are attempting to get the Louisiana congressional delegation to come up with the $3 million needed to create an armored bank of sheet piling between the channel and the lake.

A secondary alternative is to find a less-expensive project to protect the lake from the channel, Gomez said, adding that the corps may agree to undertake a project if it costs less than $2 million.

MRGO already has cut through much of the wetlands that once separated it from the lake and now threatens to spill highly saline water into the lake, ruining the fishing, DNR officials said.

DNR has been facing pressure from the Port of New Orleans to allow dredging of the channel, because restrictions have been placed on the drafts of vessels using MRGO because of the shoaling that has occurred.

DNR is taking the position it will not allow dredging, at least in the Lake Borgne area, until the corps deals with the shoreline problem of the channel it created.

In a letter to the corps granting permission to dredge the lower part of the channel, DNR cites "the economic and social repercussions of continued restriction to navigation which, according to the Port of New Orleans, would result should such dredging not occur."

But that letter only gives the corps permission to dredge the lower 33.4 miles of the channel and not the portion of MRGO near Lake Borgne, DNR officials said Friday.

The corps began work with its own dredge Thursday and will contract with a private firm to complete the project, which should be done within 90 days, according to Col. Richard Gorski, head of the corps' New Orleans district.

Officials said they expect it to be several months before shoaling in the Lake Borgne area of MRGO becomes a serious enough problem to restrict vessel traffic.

Soileau said the beneficial use of the spoil from that dredging to help mitigate the damage done by MRGO is a reasonable part of the project's costs.