Edwards admits dislike for life, death decisions

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NEW ORLEANS — Gov. Edwin Edwards admits he doesn’t like to make life or death decisions but says he acts “as responsibly as I can” when deciding whether or not a condemned killer should be executed.

Edwards’ remarks came in response to allegations made Wednesday by former state Pardon Board Chairman Howard Marsellus Jr., who said the board never to recommend to the governor that any death sentences be commuted to life in prison.

Marsellus spoke during a news conference and reception Wednesday afternoon in New Orleans for a new book written by Baton Rouge native and anti-death-penalty activist Sister Helen Prejean. Marsellus said Edwards “did not want to be put in the position of having to make the ultimate decision on whether a man lived or died.”

Edwards, in an interview Wednesday night in Eunice with Lafayette television station KATC, said “no reasonable person would want to make life or death decisions.”

“I think having that responsibility — deciding whether or not a prisoner should be executed — is an awesome responsibility, and certainly I don’t want that dumped in my lap,” Edwards said.

“But when it is dumped in my lap, I have looked at each case individually, visited with some of the inmates who are in the penitentiary and talked to them. I have pored over these records to try to see if there was any basis for commutation and agonized over it as the midnight hour approached,” the governor said.

“The truth of the matter is that these are wrenching decisions that have to be made by those of us who happen to hold this office, and I do it as responsibly as I can,” he said.

The state constitution says the governor may commute a sentence if the Pardon Board recommends that he do so, but Marsellus — who chaired the board from 1984-86 — said Edwards’ staff made it clear that the panel was not to recommend commutation of a death sentence to him.

Edwards could not be reached by telephone Wednesday afternoon or Thursday to respond to Marsellus’ allegations.

Marsellus was released in August 1989 from a federal prison in Texas after serving 20 months of a five-year sentence for his role in a pardons-for-sale scheme. He now lives in Texas.