Reef study
Say state stalls; so environmentalists to finance query into shell dredging

By JIM MCDONNELL
Staff writer

A coalition of conservation groups has decided to fund what originally was to have been a Justice Department study of coastal reefs. The same coalition that has appealed the dredging permits issued by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources — the Acadiana Redshirts Association, the Concerned Citizens of Terrebonne's Environment, the Concerned Shrimpers of Louisiana, the Iberia Rod and Gun Club, Save Our Coast and the Sierra Club's Acadian Group — had decided to finance a scientific investigation of the condition of the Marsh Island-Point Au Fer reefs with its own funds.

"The problem was the Attorney General was sitting on his hands," said Roy Pontiff, a board member of both the Iberia Rod and Gun Club and Save Our Coast. "We want this thing done and we want it done now." Assistant Attorney General Gary Keyser said he also would have liked the project to proceed as quickly as possible, but his hands were tied by red tape.

"THIS HAS BEEN going on for years," Keyser said. "It wouldn't have hurt to wait another couple of weeks." The study, to begin next week, will be conducted by a research team from the Louisiana State University Center for Wetlands Resources at a cost of $1,000 a day, to come from the coalition's treasury.

Roy Pontiff, Rod & Gun Club

according to Pontiff. In addition, Pontiff said, members of the coalition will provide the team with boats, camping facilities and food during their stay in the area. The study will focus on the Marsh Island-Point Au Fer chain, which forms part of the southernmost state boundary, according to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the tidelands dispute.

Several state officials have expressed concern that, should the reefs be destroyed, the federal government could reopen the litigation and get the legal definition of the coastline pushed back to the existing shore. Such a move would deprive the state of millions of dollars in oil and gas revenues.

The reefs were protected under a 1976 agreement between the state's Justice Department, Wildlife and Fisheries Department and the dredging companies. Spokesmen for the dredging industry consistently have denied any of the reefs in question were dredged in violation of existing agreements.

DREDGING COMPANY executives and Wildlife and Fisheries officials said the reefs may have been rendered invisible by siltation and subsidence or some of them may have been destroyed by storms. The conservation groups, on the other hand, consistently have alleged they have been dredged. Ken Gray, a Delcambre shrimper, and Ken Tuminello, a Baton Rouge wildlife biologist, both testified they witnessed dredging barges operating in prohibited areas.

Pontiff said he and all others concerned would like to put all those questions to rest. According to Rodney Adams, assistant professor of the CWR, the team will be able to determine if the reefs are gone and, if so, how and when they disappeared.