High Atchafalaya levels have Morgan City fearful

By The Associated Press

MORGAN CITY — The Atchafalaya River is setting records for March in Morgan City, and state officials are asking the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to do something about it.

Gov. Edwin Edwards; U.S. Sen. John Breaux, D-Crowley; and U.S. Rep. Billy Tauzin, D-Thibodaux, are coming to New Orleans on Saturday to discuss their request that the corps either send less water into the Atchafalaya or cut back the Wax Lake Outlet weir.

"I am very concerned that river levels are higher for this time of year than they were during (the March before) the flood of 1973 and the flood of 1983," Tauzin said Wednesday.

The river was at 6.3 feet Wednesday, and has been 6 feet or higher for the last three weeks.

Brig. Gen. Eugene Witherspoon of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will meet Saturday with the governor and congressmen.

The Morgan City area has had a continuing debate with the corps for about three years over the Wax Lake Outlet weir, which was designed to force water through Berwick Bay. The corps expected the water to scour the channel and alleviate the need for constant dredging.

However, its more noticeable effect has been rapid and dramatic floods in backwaters north and east of Morgan City, any time the water goes up.

That puts some companies out of business three months out of the year.

The corps put businesses on notice in December that saturated ground in the Midwest and heavy snows in the Northeast make a "flood event" likely some time this year, although it cannot say just when.

Twenty-five area officials and business owners met March 1 with corps officials, but Col. Michael Diffley, district commander of the corps' New Orleans office, said answers are up to Congress.

The problem is that high water often hurts businesses outside the floodwalls, including dozens of major riverfront businesses in the Morgan City-Berwick area.

The floodwall and levees reduce most flood problems, and dredging keeps Berwick Bay open to navigation, he said.

However, with high water coming more and more often, the corps can do nothing more to protect riverside industry unless Congress acts.

"You either raise them or you keep the water down," he said. "But keeping the water down is a very expensive proposition and would take years to implement."

Waterfront businesses would have to be raised about nine feet to protect them, he said. Floodwalls or ring protection systems would need authorization and money from Congress and the Mississippi River Commission, he said.

Without such authorization, he said, there is little the corps can do, because federal law requires 30 percent of the Mississippi River's flow to be diverted down the Atchafalaya at the Old River Control Structure.