Hope dims on federal funding for Basin plan

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WASHINGTON — Gov. Treen probably will leave office one of his major goals unrealized since President Reagan seems unlikely to ask Congress for federal money to protect the Atchafalaya Basin.

The President's fiscal 1985 budget request will be submitted formally at midnight Wednesday. If it contains a request for basin land-buying funds, that will surprise Treen's representative here, Jay Stone.

Usually with Stone at his side, Treen has been working two agencies here — the Interior Department and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — for at least partial federal funding of the ambitious project to build flood control works and impose development controls on protected acreage in the basin.

Treen made a quick and quiet trip to Washington a couple of weeks ago for a last lobbying effort for his basin proposal.

Reportedly, the best Treen got was Interior Secretary William Clark's promise that he'd review the request and that Treen would get an answer soon.

In Stone's estimation early this week, the answer probably will be "no," at least for the president's fiscal 1985 budget plan.

Stone assumed that he would have received a tip-off by now if Reagan were seeking money for the Atchafalaya Basin.

Last week, Clark sent some Republican senators a letter promising the administration's new flexibility on the controversial subject of "cost sharing" on water projects.

"Cost sharing" refers to Reagan's insistence that Congress write a new law, imposing flat percentages for local/state financing shares of navigation, flood control, water recreation, irrigation, and water supply projects. As a multi-purpose project, the Basin preservation plan involves several of those uses, and might have been subject to anywhere from 30 to 75 percent Louisiana-financing for various of its parts, under past "cost sharing" proposals floated by the White House.

Now, through Clark, Reagan says he still will insist on states and localities paying.

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more than they have in the past for water projects construction and operation. But Reagan also has backed away from imposing flat percentages, nationwide, for cost sharing.

The implication is that new water projects will be negotiated case-by-case, although that language is not used specifically in Clark's letter.

Interior Department and Corps of Engineers officials may clarify what the policy shift means next week, when they appear at budget hearings before numerous Congressional committees.

In the meantime, however, Stone seized on the new cost sharing initiative from the White House to lobby again for basin funds this year.

In Louisiana, the state has donated large tracts of land to basin preservation, and, in Treen's view, is asking the federal government only for about a 50 percent match on the land-buying parts of the project.

"I contacted Interior and the Corps to see if the general change in policy would push them toward recognition of our work on putting local funds into the Atchafalaya Basin, since we're already on a 50 percent cost share (for land acquisition)," said Stone. "I told them they could use us as an example, and say, 'Here's Louisiana. Louisiana puts her money where her mouth is.'" Stone said.

"The answer I got back is that OMB (Office of Management and Budget) has a hard time distinguishing the $30 million part for land-buying from the overall $1 billion project over 20 years," he said. "Unless they can get cost sharing worked out for the whole project over 20 years, they're not going to pick it off a piece at a time. Of course, we want them to pick it off a piece at a time."

Asked if anyone has tried to start hard bargaining toward a "cost sharing" agreement for the total Basin project, Stone said "no." He recalled Treen's insistence at a Senate committee hearing last year that the expensive flood control aspects of the project — both construction and long-term maintenance — are a federal responsibility because Louisiana receives so much of the nation's flood waters and commerce in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Basins.

"There's no way we can participate in the dredging, levees, that sort of thing, at 30, 40, 50 percent — whatever the federal requirement would be," said Stone. "It's a national problem, not a local problem, on the flood aspect."

Louisiana's alternative approach to get federal money for basin protection is the Congress. Louisianaans on House and Senate Appropriations and House Public Works committees are working the project into several bills. However, passage of the bills has been slowed by the fight over cost sharing and prospects still are unclear for this legislative year.