House OKs Atchafalaya land funds

By JOAN McKinney
Advocate Washington bureau

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House Thursday voted the first funds for Atchafalaya Basin land purchases and for planning of a deeper Mississippi River shipping channel, even though neither Louisiana project yet has passed the House's review for merit.

The two Louisiana projects, and 18 other unauthorized projects, were singled out for fast-track treatment in the unusual appropriations bill that reached the House floor before an authorizing bill.

That authorization bill is in the system and includes the 20 "new starts", as well as about 150 other navigation, flood control, irrigation, water quality and water recreation projects nationwide.

The special money bill passed Thursday stipulates that money can't be released to the specially treated 20 projects until the authorization bill actually becomes law.

But opponents complained that the 20 accelerated projects then will immediately qualify for fiscal 1984 funding and will be jumped ahead of other worthy projects relegated to "the back burner."

Led by Rep. Robert Edgar, D-Pa., these opponents charged that the fast-tracked projects are mostly in districts represented by Appropriations Committee members. Two Louisianians are on that committee, New Orleans Democrat Lindy Boggs and New Orleans Republican Robert Livingston.

The appropriations leadership, supported by the authorizing committee's chairman, replied that the controversial 20 projects are emergency cases or the highest priorities among all water projects before the Congress.

There have been no newly authorized water projects for seven years, a period in which Congress, environmentalists, and two presidents have fought over policy reforms.

Some of these reforms are embodied in the later-arriving authorization bill. Edgar charged that the reform drive is undercut by singling out a few projects for special treatment.

Embodyed in the pending authorization bill are provisions for a new national commission to set standards for initiating water projects, and a still-undefined financing scheme to force local and state governments — and possibly private landowners, or shippers — to pay more of what has been a largely federal expense of building and maintaining the water projects.

This re-worked financing is called "users' fees" or "cost-sharing."

The appropriations leadership promised that any new cost-sharing policy later written by Congress will be applied retroactively to the 20 new projects funded Thursday, and even to previously authorized projects long on the law books.

If that happens, Louisiana will be paying more than it's accustomed to for building and maintaining navigation and flood-control projects.

An Edgar amendment to strip the 20 fast-tracked new projects out of the appropriations bill failed, 271 to 133. Edgar might win eventually, anyway, because Budget Director David Stockman Wednesday advised Congress that the president's "senior advisers" will recommend he veto the money bill.

The House-passed bill sends fiscal 1984 construction funds to 43 projects in 25 states — 23 old projects and the 20 new projects.

The bill's total is almost $119 million, about one-third of which is earmarked to the not-yet-authorized projects. On these projects, money would be spent for engineering and pre-construction planning.

Because the cost-sharing formula is still unknown, the bill doesn't assign exact appropriations amounts to individual projects.

A committee report on the bill puts a $250 million price tag on completion of the new wildlife and land-protection features being added to an old Atchafalaya Basin flood-control plan.

The federal money will go to help buy 48,000 acres of protected land in the Basin, the report states.

The report calls for deepening the Mississippi River navigation channel to 55 feet from Baton Rouge south to the Gulf of Mexico. According to the report, federal funds also would be used to deepen part of the New Orleans harbor to 40 feet and to build "a turning basin at Baton Rouge."

Despite the bill's failure to specify project amounts, the Basin protection plan could receive $1.3 million and the Mississippi River project about $16.6 million for fiscal '84. These figures are based on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers "capability" statements given to the Appropriations Committee.

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The state already has spent $12 million on land purchases, and Treen said he plans to recommend another $12 million for next year, to bring the state's purchases up to about 25,000 acres. Many other acres were donated by the Dow Corp. The state hopes to provide 240,000 acres, Treen said, for public use.

If Clark and OMB will sign on, Treen and Johnston indicated, they can succeed in getting a fast-track appropriation through Congress this year. Both regard accelerated funding as important to holding together a pact that was worked out by Treen and numerous groups interested in the Basin project. The pact commits private landowners to selling land into a Basin preservation and flood control project, but that pledge extends only through September 1985.

Johnston said he has no more than 45 days to get the questions of authorization and funding resolved. Clark promised to try to give Johnston an answer from OMB sometime next week.

Treen succeeded in getting landowners, ecologists, sportsmen, and flood control advocates to agree to a pact that included flood control and wildlife and land protection, while also allowing public access and some minerals, fisheries, and timber usages.

Treen has said that the state's contribution of funds and its commitments for further spending should satisfy anything the Reagan administration wants in local cost sharing.

One of the holdups at OMB, however, has been that the flood control aspects of the project will cost the federal government a billion dollars, under the Corps. OMB would like Louisiana cost-sharing on that, too, but Treen, Johnston and other members of the Louisiana congressional delegation insist that flood control in the basin is a national problem and a federal government duty.

Clark committed to seek funds for basin plan

Gov. Treen said Friday that the decision by the U.S. Department of Interior to join in buying land within the Atchafalaya Basin — and to spend $25 million — "is a major breakthrough in federal participation."

Support from the Interior Department is unique, Treen said, since the project preserving land in the basin is basically sponsored by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Interior Secretary William B. Clark Friday publicly committed to try to fit an Atchafalaya Basin land-buying project into his wetlands budget, possibly at $25 million over time, and possibly beginning this year.

"That's new. That's brand new. That's great," said Jay Stone, who is Gov. Treen's Washington representative. Stone sat in a Senate committee room as Appropriations Committee member U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, D-La., tried to pin Clark to a schedule for federal funds for protecting the basin. Johnston was satisfied enough with what he heard that, after several minutes of questioning, he said, "I think I'll quit while I'm ahead."

However, while he gave his personal endorsement of the Basin project as a model of federal-state cooperation, Clark did not absolutely promise an addition of basin land-buying money to the administration's budget proposal for this year. He left the administration some maneuvering room, saying he still has to run his, Treen's and Johnston's proposals through the White House Office of Management and Budget. In the past, OMB has been the chief obstacle to Treen's getting money for the basin flood control and wetlands preservation project.

Stone expressed the hope, however, that