Johnston pushes Basin land-buying

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. Interior Department will sign contracts soon for land appraisals in the Atchafalaya Basin, but it also is considering using Basin land-buying funds for other needs, Interior Secretary-designate Donald P. Hodel said.

At stake is possible reprogramming of between $5 million and $7 million of the $10 million that Congress appropriated last summer and ordered to be spent immediately on Basin land acquisitions.

The reprogramming request, if it is made, would have to clear Congressional appropriating committees, and Senate Appropriations member Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, D-La., has promised to block it.

At a Senate confirmation hearing last week, Hodel said he was “not aware of” a reprogramming request aimed at the Basin funds. But following up with written answers to questions from Johnston, Hodel gave news about Interior’s tentative planning for the Basin habitat protection project.

Hodel’s written reply is:

“It is my understanding that the Department is preparing a reprogramming request along the lines you have indicated based upon consideration of what monies can be spent. If confirmed, I will review this matter personally to seek to avoid reprogrammings which inappropriately prevent the Department from carrying out its responsibilities.”

Johnston also asked about an appraisal schedule for the Basin, and Hodel replied in writing:

“I am told that the Fish and Wildlife Service is in the process of letting a contract for appraisal of approximately 10,000 acres in the Atchafalaya Basin during fiscal year 1985, and understand the contract will be let in approximately two months.”

Johnston contended that, if appraisals start immediately, all $10 million appropriated for Basin land acquisitions could be spent this year — assuming the money is not reprogrammed.

Hodel’s written reply is:

“Yes, I think that you are correct, assuming that agreement can be reached on price and technicalities regarding mineral estates.”

To Johnston’s direct requests, Hodel promised to review Basin issues personally, to designate an Interior contact person for Johnston and Louisiana officials, and to direct Interior staff to consult with Johnston before a reprogramming submission.

Hodel’s status report on the Basin coincides with release Monday of President Reagan’s fiscal 1986 budget.

Except for small amounts of carryover funds, that budget proposes a three-year freeze on new land purchases for federal wildlife refuges and for national parks.

Assuming they save the Basin project’s previously appropriated funds from a reprogramming attempt, the Louisiana congressional delegation will be searching for an additional $10 million for the second phase of federal land buying in the Basin. The proposed budget freeze will make that legislative search more difficult.