Jury votes against shell dredging

By Betsy Cook

The St. Mary Parish Police jury took an environmental stand at their Wednesday meeting and voted for a resolution opposing shell dredging off the coast of Louisiana.

The resolution was similar to a resolution passed by the Iberia Parish Police Jury in October 1982. Iberia Parish Juror Camille DeGravelle presented the jury with a copy of their resolution at the meeting.

Richard Hayes, president of Save Our Coast, spoke on behalf of the resolution. Hayes said his organization is seeking to stop dredging entirely. "We've tried for compromise on the issue, but have not been successful."

"Every mile of wetlands each year, and part of this problem is due to the dredging of the shell reefs off the coast. Shell reefs act as natural barriers against wave action which causes this erosion," he said.

Hayes also stressed the importance the reefs have in regard to their role as a marine fishery. "It must be emphasized that the worth of these reefs is not solely as a source of oysters," he said. "These reefs serve as an intricate ecosystem for all forms of marine life. Commercial fishermen and sportsmen harvest untold amounts of crabs, shrimp and fish from these shell reefs."

The shell reefs are also important to the mineral rights of Louisiana, according to Hayes. In an agreement between the U.S. Attorney General's Office and the Louisiana Attorney General's Office, the Rabbit Island and Point Au Fer shell reefs were to act as part of the southern boundary for Louisiana with regards to the three mile limit relating to oil and gas royalties.

"As these reefs were some five to eight miles off the Louisiana coast, they extended Louisiana's royalty rights into some of the richest gas fields along our state's coastline," said Hayes.

Hayes said the agreement was to stay in effect as long as the reefs existed. Both reefs are located in St. Mary Parish.

"For all practical purposes, these reefs no longer exist," said Hayes. "Evidence indicates that they have been dredged to extinction—under the auspices of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), the agency charged with supervising dredging activities."

Hayes said a "battle royale" is building up between the U.S. Attorney General's Office and Louisiana. "Louisiana could stand to lose an annual $200 million in oil royalties, if our state boundary is pushed back five to eight miles as a result of the loss of these reefs," said Hayes.

Hayes accused the LDWF of engaging in a conflict of interest in regulating shell dredging. "That department also receives a significant portion of the royalties from shell dredging," he said. "This seems quite controversial, as the more shells dredged, the fatter the LDWF becomes."

The dredging of reefs in the newly forming Atchafalaya delta has been questioned by the Center for Wetlands Research and the U.S. Wildlife Service according to Hayes. "This delta represents an extremely intricate and delicate area, and respected biologists from these two agencies have expressed grave doubts about the wisdom of dredging in the delta region," said Hayes.

Juror Albert Foulcard expressed support for the resolution, and questioned Louisiana's acceptance of dredging activities. "I'd like to know why these companies don't dredge in other states, such as Alabama," he said. Presently, the two companies with permits to dredge in Louisiana are Radcliff, Inc., based in Alabama, and Lake Charles Dredging and Towing Co., based in Houston.

Several jurors, including Juror Harold Clausen, said studies that they have seen indicated land was building along the Louisiana coast, especially in the newly forming Atchafalaya delta, rather than eroding.

"You do have a unique situation there, and one that is being studied by scientists from all over the world," said Harold Schoeffler, president of the Acadia chapter of the Sierra Club. Schoeffler is also a member of Save Our Coasts.

"On our entire Louisiana coast, there are only two areas where land is building," said Schoeffler. We gained 300,000 acres of emergent land, semi-emergent land, marsh land, last year, in the delta."

Schoeffler said provisions were made to protect this new land from dredging activities, but have been ignored by the shell dredging companies. "They dredged a canal right through the delta, and dredged up one of the Louisiana Wetlands Resource Center's test sites," he said. "These people have completely ignored the rights of Louisiana."

Clausen cast the only dissenting vote on the ordinance.