Louisiana officials to try again for Atchafalaya Basin funds

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WASHINGTON — Louisiana officials in the next few days will make another hard push at the Reagan administration to provide funds for land buying this year for the Atchafalaya Basin protection plan, a project not specifically funded when the president this month sent his 1985 budget to Congress.

In a Senate committee hearing Friday, U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, D-La., will tell Interior Secretary William Clark that he will be asking about the basin project when Clark testifies at a Senate Appropriations subcommittee, and Johnston asked Clark to "be prepared to address" specific Basin land-buying suggestions advanced both by Gov. Edwin Edwards and Johnston himself.

Before President Reagan completed his "85 budget, Treen made another plea at the Senate committee hearing that the Basin project in a private meeting here with Clark.

Reportedly, Treen still is trying to reverse the initial budget rejection in a few weeks he has left in office. An opportunity for more discussions with the administration may come next week, when Treen will be here for the winter meeting of the National Governors' Association.

Besides arguing for the Basin project in its flood control, land and wildlife protection merits, Treen, in the letter to Clark, reportedly made a political argument to the Reagan administration officials. That message was that the Republican administration might as well fund the project now and get political credit for it, because, eventually, Louisiana will be on the congressional authorizing committees probably will be able to move the Basin project past the opposition at the White House Office of Management and Budget.

In that case, several Louisiana Democrats would be getting much of the political credit, among them incoming Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, D-Maine, who reportedly is leaning in favor of the project.

Massive federal funding in the Basin began as a proposed flood control project under the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The project was halted by environmentalists' opposition. At that time, Treen began to lobby Interior Department officials for a Basin protection project from the federal government to finish buying all the land private owners are willing to sell.

In an early January letter to Clark, Treen noted Reagan's State of the Union speech promise of more money to buy lands for the National Park system, and he asked in his letter to Clark, Johnston targeted another Interior Department program, "the newly proposed state wetlands grants program." Under that, he notes, Interior will "acquire wetland areas" and help conserve them, dependent on "the availability of state matching funds." According to him, the program already is being promoted in the state by Louisiana's two U.S. senators. In a letter to Clark, Johnston wrote, adding "... this same approach" to the Basin project, Johnston wrote, adding "... this same approach xbox.

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