Lake Martin tops Basin panel’s list

First projects in 15-year plan to begin next year.

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State Editor

BATON ROUGE - A group committed to improving the Atchafalaya Basin is wasting no time getting started.

Armed with several million dollars and big plans, the Atchafalaya Basin Advisory Committee has on the books for next year construction projects aimed at improving water flow and increasing tourism. It also plans to sponsor events that educate the public about the nation’s largest freshwater swamp and promote adventures. These are the first projects in a 15-year plan.

One of the first-year projects is to develop a master plan for protecting Lake Martin, which was described as “the best-kept secret in St. Martin Parish — but not for long.”

Sandra Thompson, leader of the Atchafalaya Basin project, said the lake is suffering from “too much of a good thing.” It is home to many alligators and 10,000 pairs of nesting birds along its banks.

The problem, she said, is that bird droppings are polluting the lake. A project to be tackled in the first year calls for pumping water into the lake from the Ruth Canal to “flush it out” yearly.

Alligators are building their nests near the trees, Thompson said, “so if any of the little baby birds unfortunately fall out of the nest, they’ll have little hars d’oeuvres.”

The first-year list also includes improvements at boat landings at Belle River, Cypress Cove and Marshfield, a welcome center at Butte LaRose with construction of a children’s fishing pier, development of a gateway with hiking and biking trails and an elevated walkway at Henderson and development of a park and Basin Interpretive center by reclaiming some of Lake Palourde in Morgan City.

In early April, an “eco-challenge” is planned that will include running, hiking, biking and canoeing in the Basin. Promoters hope to draw attention to the Basin and attract adventurers from across the nation.

Phil Breaux, organizer of the Atchafalaya Adventure Race, said the race will take at least two days and could be extended.

He is working with C.C. Lockwood on the route.

Information on the committee’s projects is available on the project Web site www.dnr.state.la.us/atchafalaya.

In conjunction with the Lynch Botanical Gardens at Henderson, plans are being developed for construction of a 12-foot-wide, 250-foot-long wooden footbridge and an observation tower to look out over the Basin.

A heritage museum to demonstrate the Basin’s ecosystem is planned for next year.

The Marshfield Landing, which provides access to Lake Fausse Pointe and Lake Dauterive, will be improved and have bulkheading installed and a parking lot built nearby.

Jim Anderson of New Iberia said vehicles and trailers now have park about a half-mile from the boat landing because there’s no room.

At the Belle River Landing, where as many as 500 boats have been lined up awaiting docking on three double ramps, a 300-foot floating dock will be built and security and lighting will be installed.

The funding is 50-50 state and federal.

Morgan City Mayor Tim Matte is pushing a project that calls for a rock dam to be built 400 feet from shore at the end of Lake Palourde near the levee and dredged material from the Basin used to fill it in. When completed, “Linear Park” would be the site of an interpretative center, a campground and information center.

While numerous improvements are being built, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is working to secure hundreds of acres of more public land in the basin and to control land use.

Corps representative Clyde Sellers said he is securing easements on land use so “we don’t have a lot of changes that would destroy the Basin further than it already is.”

Ernie Gammon, chairman of the project’s Channel Maintenance Committee, said one of the Basin’s water quality problems is due to natural drainage being blocked by levees created when pipeline canals were dredged.

He described a test project in the Pierre Part/Belle River area in which cuts will be made in the spoil banks to allow rainwater to flow into the canals. If it works as expected, other canal spoils can be cleared.

Oversized, double-sided maps using satellite imagery of the Atchafalaya Basin are being prepared for sale.

One side would be fully annotated with longitude and latitude lines and mileage scale for navigation.

The other would show all roads and numbers, boat launch sites, names of waterways, places of interest, tourist attractions and short descriptions of the history, culture and economics of areas.

The maps, which will be sold for no more than $12, will be printed on heavy waterproof paper in flat or pre-folded formats.