Part 1: Man takes control

Every day, the Atchafalaya River dumps muddy, sediment-rich water into the Gulf of Mexico south of Morgan City, incrementally building land along a coast that otherwise is starved for soil.

That water and sediment have taken a long journey, flowing from the Yellowstone, Platte, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri and Arkansas rivers, past corn fields and green hills, past mountains and prairies, past the Midwest metropolis of Minneapolis and the southern belle, Memphis.

The waters of the Mississippi River reach a crossroads in Louisiana above Old River near the Louisiana State Penitentiary. It is there that the waters will take either a 315-mile journey along the Mississippi River or a 142-mile journey down the Atchafalaya River before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico.

For decades, the water has wanted to take the quickest route to the Gulf, along the shorter, steeper Atchafalaya. Man won’t allow it.

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Man takes control

South Louisiana was built over centuries as the Mississippi River deposited its rich sediment, shifting its course east and west, always seeking the shortest route to the Gulf of Mexico.

But as man built levees to stop river flooding, the sediment was carried downstream, building land at the river’s mouth. That made the journey to the Gulf even longer and intensified the Mississippi’s need for a shorter route to the Gulf — the Atchafalaya River.

But if the Mississippi River were to shift course, so too would river traffic and commerce, an economic disaster for cities like Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

The lower Mississippi Valley flood of 1927 had a profound and lasting effect on the Atchafalaya River and Basin.

It led to passage of the Flood Control Act of 1928, the first federal comprehensive plan to control the Mississippi River. It also changed attitudes about flood control away from a “levees only” approach and made flood control as high a priority with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as navigation.

Intensified efforts

Despite the flood control efforts that came out of the 1928 act, the Atchafalaya River

continued to capture more of the Mississippi. By the 1950s, some feared a permanent shift was near.

“In the 1950s, the corps decided it had to do something or the Mississippi River would be the Atchafalaya,” said Russel Beauvais, corps operations manager of the Old River Control Structures.

“They couldn’t allow that to happen.”

With the Flood Control Act of 1954, more levees and control structures were built along the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers to guarantee that no more than 30 percent of the Mississippi would travel down the Atchafalaya, thus preserving the Mississippi for navigation and commerce.

Those control structures and accompanying levees turned the Basin into a spillway to be flooded when needed to save Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

One of the Old River Control Structures, completed in 1963, nearly failed 10 years later, so the corps built a new auxiliary structure in 1986 that is the primary mechanism used today for controlling the rivers’ diversion.

But today 30 percent of the Mississippi River is diverted down both the Red and Atchafalaya rivers, not just down the Atchafalaya, Beauvais said.

That is a bone of contention with some in the Basin, like crawfishermen, who argue that insufficient water is sent into the Basin, starving fisheries, harming them economically and killing the Basin.

Some of the Mississippi River’s water also flows through the privately owned Sidney A. Murray Jr. Hydroelectric Station, which generates electricity for Vidalia and Entergy, said William David Harris, general manager, Louisiana Hydroelectric.

From the plant, the water is sent down the Atchafalaya, he said, although crawfishermen have long argued otherwise.

Impacts on the Basin

Because of man’s attempt to control the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers, the Atchafalaya Basin is not as productive, not as fertile, not as beautiful as it once was.

But flood control isn’t its only problem.

Cypress trees, hundreds of years old, were clear-cut for lumber and more recently to create mulch for gardens.

Canals dug for oil and natural gas criss-cross the swamps, aiding erosion, their spoil banks interfering with the flow of water needed to refresh the swamps.

Battles over ownership pit commercial and recreational fishermen against landowners and leaseholders.

And when it comes to flood control, some say the Atchafalaya Basin is no better protected today than it was in 1927.

“The most critical issue is collapse of the channels in the Basin,” Sierra Club chapter President Harold Schoeffler said. “The channels can no longer carry the project flood.”

A federal program created in 1986 authorized the corps to restore and renew the Basin, said Stephen Chustz, director of the Atchafalaya Basin Program for the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources.

As part of that program, the corps has purchased parcels of land to maintain them for public use. Some say it’s just not enough and much of the money was spent on museums and tourist attractions in towns instead of projects to protect the Basin.

In 2008, state law put greater emphasis on water quality and management in an effort to restore the ecology and habitat of the Basin, Chustz said.

“We recognize that the work being done under the corps program needs to be expedited,” he said.

These and other issues will be addressed in greater detail in this occasional series in coming weeks and months.