Bonifay pushes Manchac project

BY AMY WOLD
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It's time for Bayou Manchac to get a share of fresh water from the Mississippi River, according to Frank Bonifay, co-owner of Alligator Bayou Tours.

And now, with the possibility of the state getting a share of outer continental shelf oil production revenues, he wants people to know that it's a need that can be met.

On Monday, Bonifay met with U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal, R-Kenner, to give the congressman his plan of how fresh water could be moved into the bayou. This plan would help restore cypress swamp in the area and provide flood control protection for areas in East Baton Rouge, Ascension and Iberville parishes, Bonifay said.

Bonifay said the project would cost about $80 million and involve dredging 8.5 miles of Bayou Manchac, purchasing about 200 acres where the river and bayou meet and the construction of a pump station that would move water from the Mississippi River into the bayou.

Bonifay said he would like to see the money for the project come from the offshore oil revenues currently being discussed in a House and Senate version of the Gulf of Mexico Energy Bill. That bill will be worked out in September when members of the federal House and Senate try to come up with a compromise that can be presented to the President.

"The definition (for that bill) is flood control and restoration," Bonifay said. "And we fit both."

Although no formal studies have been done to design the project, Bonifay said it makes common sense because Mississippi River flooding is what made the area a healthy swamp ecosystem in the first place.

Bayou Manchac has been closed off from the Mississippi since the early 1800s, and the lack of fresh water into the area has already killed some of the historic cypress forests.

He said the water could continue to flow out of the bayou and help reverse saltwater intrusion into Lake Maurepas and Lake Pontchartrain. This is what used to happen with the Mississippi River regularly flooded the area, he said.

"If we can mimic what creation has started, this is the way to go," Bonifay said. The goal, he said, is to restore the natural hydrology of the area as much as possible.

In addition, he said, the system could be used to provide drainage during high rains by reversing the flow to pump flood water into the Mississippi River.

"The water from East Baton Rouge gets to us so quickly," Valentine said.

Although Jindal didn't make a commitment to the project, he commended Bonifay for stepping up and putting his own money into purchasing part of the area.

Bonifay owns about 300 acres in the Alligator Bayou area and about 900 acres as part of a nonprofit Bluff Swamp Wildlife Refuge.

Jindal said he wants to see an oil revenue sharing bill — which could mean billions of dollars for coastal restoration in Louisiana — reach the president's desk by the end of September.

"We've got a once-in-a-generational opportunity to reverse erosion in the states," Jindal said. Louisiana loses about 25 square miles of land a year through coastal erosion.

"Hurricanes Katrina and Rita reminded the country how important our wetlands are," he said. However, the further the country moves away from last year's hurricanes, the harder it's getting approval for the money is going to get.

"We cannot afford to waste this opportunity," Jindal said.