Officials keeping Atchafalaya Basin ‘wet, wild’

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Federal and state officials say they are working hard to keep the Atchafalaya Basin “wet and wild” and making progress on implementing a state master plan for both preservation and development of the 838,000-acre floodway.

The government agencies reported to more than 80 people who attended the first of two public meetings sponsored by the Sierra Club. A second meeting is scheduled at 7:30 tonight at the National Wetlands Research Center, 700 Cajundome Blvd., in Lafayette.

Charles Fryling, chairman of the Sierra Club’s Atchafalaya Basin Committee showed colorful photographic slides of the basin to set the mood for the meeting. “This is a world-class landscape that we are trying to protect,” Fryling said.

The basin is “4½ times more productive in fish and wildlife than even the Everglades,” he said. “If we can keep it wet and wild, we will continue to have natural resources, such as crawfish, that we can enjoy for years and years to come. What a beautiful place we inherited,” Fryling said.

The current generation has an obligation to ensure “it is still wet and wild for future generations,” he said.

Six years ago, the Sierra Club held a similar set of hearings on the lack of progress on a 1985 congressional-approved plan.

The club feels it helped inspire a new effort that resulted in a state master plan for development and creation of a partnership between the Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The state has approved a 15-year, $85 million plan that will be matched by $250 million in spending by the corps.

The master plan preserves and restores some portions of the 838,000-acre basin and develops other parts for recreation and tourism.

The corps was the first of the nine federal and state agencies that gave brief reports on what is being done to further the plan or protect the basin.

Robert Campos of the corps is buying land, purchasing conservation easements and constructing restoration projects and recreational facilities.

The state is sharing some costs and is agreeing to pick up much of the maintenance and operational costs.

The corps is purchasing 50,000 acres from willing sellers and 330,000 acres of easements. All should be completed by 2009, Campos said.

While part of the plan is to buy cypress stands for preservation, no willing sellers have been found on the southern end of the basin, Campos said. One willing seller on the northern end is in negotiations, he said.

The corps is also designing two major water management plans for sections of the basin and more plans may be devised in the future, Campos said.

Managing how the water flows through the basin is important to wildlife, including endangered species, said Dave Fruge of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He said the service has identified key wildlife areas that need to be purchased or protected.

The service is working with the corps to better use the Old River Control Structure, which determines how much of the Mississippi River goes into the Atchafalaya Basin, to improve water circulation in the basin and sediment flow down to the delta.

Bobby Wilkinson of the Department of Natural Resources’ Atchafalaya Basin Program said the program will soon make available satellite photo maps of the basin. The program has 18 groups working on implementing the master plan and invited public participation. “If you have an interest, sign up for a committee,” Wilkinson said.

The projects he reported on included a tourism and welcome center on Interstate 10 at Butte Larose and acquisition of a land for a fishing pier, which has been delayed because of a disagreement with the seller.

An alternative is being found, he said.

“The basin may be privately owned but it really belongs to the public. It is your basin and my basin,” he said.

State Forester Paul Frey of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry said that agency is monitoring timber cutting in conservation and environmental easements.

Conditions don’t favor timber growth except between Interstate 10 and U.S. 190, Frey said. Most of the timber lands are in private hands and under supervision of foresters and therefore “in relatively good shape.”

There are 300 survey plots that the department has used over the years and they will be used to determine the effectiveness of the management and development plan and whether water needs to flow in or be kept out, Frey said.

Gary Tilyou of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is very active in the basin, from operation of shooting ranges to killing aquatic plants. He said the agency lacks the money to make some improvements it envisions, such as improving the roads and camping facilities on the two wildlife management areas in the basin. The agency would also like to build viewing stations and hiking trails.

The agency would also like to do more monitoring of fish and water in the basin, he said.

Charles St. Romain of the State Land Office said no new camps will be allowed on state lands and water bottoms in the basin, he said.

Dave Muth of the National Park Service said studies have not suggested that the basin should be a national park, but it could be designated as a National Heritage Area or part of it could be included in Jean Lafitte National Park.

Jason Stagg of the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism talked about plans to create an Atchafalaya Trace, similar to the Scenic Byways programs. Tourists could drive around and through the basin to learn more about the natural wonder of the basin and about the culture and history surrounding the basin. A commission composed of representatives of the 13 parishes that surround the basin is now beginning the planning process, he said.

The commission may also pursue designation as a National Heritage Area.