Fearing fish kills, officials want Atchafalaya flow cut

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Flood waters pouring down the Mississippi River toward Louisiana may not pose a danger to people here but do pose a serious threat to the fisheries of the Atchafalaya Basin, biologists say.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also is concerned about potential fish kills and environmental damage from flood waters entering the sensitive basin and is seeking permission to lower the percentage of water being diverted from the Mississippi River into the Atchafalaya at the Old River Control Structure.

State biologists fear rising water in the basin would create vast areas of water with low dissolved oxygen, a predicament similar to the one caused by Hurricane Andrew last August that killed an estimated 175 million finfish. The basin, usually a paradise for fishermen, has not yet recovered.

The problem is that a flood coming this late in the year will put water into swamps that have already dried out.

The water there will pick up organic matter and, as it sits in summer heat, become extremely low in dissolved oxygen, said Larry Hartzog, a biologist for the corps.

This water will drain back into the basin's lakes, canals and bayous at the hottest time of the year, when oxygen is already low in those areas, he said.

The concern of biologists is that the organic matter and water almost devoid of oxygen will cause fish kills when it flows back into the waterways, Hartzog said.

“We're in the process of writing a letter (to the Mississippi River Commission) proposing that we take steps to curtail flows to the Atchafalaya,” said Jim Addison of the corps in New Orleans.

He said he is unsure how the commission will respond.

More on threat to fish, Page 4A

See FISH, Page 4A
CONTINUED FROM 1A

Instead of diverting 30 percent of the flow of the Mississippi River to the Atchafalaya, as is normal, the corps' New Orleans District is proposing that only 27 percent of the river's flow be put down the Atchafalaya during the upcoming rise in river volume.

That would mean that instead of a rise of 3 feet at Butte La Rose on the Atchafalaya the water would rise only about 1.5 feet, according to corps officials.

Corps officials said they don't foresee any danger of flooding along the Mississippi River as a result of the change.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries had asked the corps to manipulate the Old River Control Structure to prevent any rise in the Atchafalaya.

"Any consideration you can give to this suggestion will be appreciated by the department and the thousands of fishermen who are eagerly awaiting the recovery of the fish population in this important area," says the letter from Joe Herring, head of the state agency.

"We just don't want to see a lot of water get back in those areas and go bad again," said state biologist Mike Walker, referring to the massive fish kills that occurred in the wake of Hurricane Andrew last year.

"Too much work went into restocking the area to risk killing off fish right now," Walker said.

While the corps is not seeking as much relief as the state fisheries agency wanted, the reduction "should be enough to make a difference," Addison said. "We're trying to avoid putting as much high water as we can down the Atchafalaya." 

The maximum the corps has determined it can cut back the flow to the Atchafalaya and still be within the safety standards for the structure is 3 percent of the total flow, corps officials said.

"There are limitations on our structures, and we need to operate within safe and allowable limits," said Arthur Laurent of the corps.

"This district is sensitive to the needs of the fisheries department and our office is studying what can be done," he said, "but there are other factors to consider if the flow is reduced."

Laurent said among the other considerations is the effect it may have on navigation, dredging and flooding downriver.

The National Weather Service's revised estimates call for a 5-foot rise in river stages at Simmesport by July 29, a 4-foot rise at Melville, a 3-foot rise at Butte La Rose and seven-tenths of a foot rise at Morgan City if there is no change in the distribution of water at the Old River Control Structure, said Arthur Williams of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Flood stage at Morgan City is 4 feet in the Atchafalaya River. Readings on that gauge have been above flood stage since early March.

Tuesday's reading was 4.29 feet.

The National Weather Service has predicted a steady rise in the Mississippi River from about the 25-foot mark on the Baton Rouge gauge to the 30½-foot level on Aug. 1. That is well below flood stage.

The Old River Control Structure near Lettsworth was completed in 1962 to keep the Atchafalaya River from capturing the flow of the Mississippi River. The structure comes under the authority of the Mississippi River Commission, which was created by Congress in 1879 to oversee navigation and flood control on the river.