Old River Structure Satisfies Johnston

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Two Louisiana State professors will try to convince Sen. Bennett Johnston, D-La., today that the Old River Structure won't win the battle against the Mississippi River.

The pair, Raphael Kazmann and David B. Johnson, have said the floodgate facility near Simmesport isn't strong enough to keep the Atchafalaya River from capturing the Mississippi — a move that could leave New Orleans without a port and, at the same time, put Morgan City under water.

Their views spurred a publicity tour of the structure by Johnston Thursday and a Baton Rouge hearing by his Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development.

Johnston said he was satisfied with the Corps' structure, but added he wanted to give Kazman, a professor of civil engineering, and Johnson, a professor of economics, a full hearing.

The Shreveport senator was whisked to the Concordia Parish site from Baton Rouge by Army helicopter and was accompanied by five helicopters he provided for the news media and others.

Col. Thomas Sands, head of the New Orleans district of the U. S. Corps of Engineers, and his staff, briefed Johnston at the structure and said it will hold, especially with $216 million worth of modifications planned over the next few years. Those modifications include a new channel and an auxiliary structure.

"People in New Orleans are worried that they may wind up high and dry without water while those in Morgan City are concerned they'll be washed away to Yucatan," Johnston said. "We want to reassure them."

The structure — a series of floodgates — was completed in 1963 after a 1950 Corps report said that the Mississippi would change its course into the Atchafalaya by 1975 unless something was done.

The gates allow 30 percent of the Mississippi's flow into the Atchafalaya. The facility is built in a channel that links the two major rivers.

It has been damaged over the years — by accidents in 1964 and 1965 when barges moved into the channel and slammed into the gates, and in 1973 by a flood that scoured out some of the channel, weakening the structure.

Since 1973, various repairs have been made.

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In the 1964 and 1965 accidents, the floodgates had to be closed so the barges could be removed. With open gates, the water pressure would be so great, the barges couldn't be pulled away.

"We are still faced with the fact that it can't stand emergencies such as barge accidents," said Sands.

With a new channel and structure, the gates on the Old River Structure could be fully closed in an emergency with the new channel and structure relieving the pressure.

Until the modifications are completed in late 1985, the Corps is depending on its parolling "picket" boat which would try to herd disabled barges away from the channel.

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