Opposition support mustered to shell dredging restrictions

By BOB ANDERSON
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NEW ORLEANS — Shell dredging firms marshalled strong support from other industries in labor here Thursday night in their effort to stop the state from restricting the number of days they can dredge.

Turnout by environmentalists was light, and there were complaints that some environmental groups had not been notified about the hearing until the last minute, while industry had received earlier notification.

Since some people said they did not get sufficient notification, another hearing probably will be held next week in Ponchatoula, said Mike Bourgeois, deputy secretary of the Department of Natural Resources.

“Our intent to hear all sides was sincere,” Bourgeois said.

DNR is considering putting a limit of 265 days a year on dredging in Lakes Ponchartrain and Meraux in order to give the lake bottoms more time to recover between dredgings.

But shell industry representatives said that such regulations are unnecessary because the bottom-living organisms already have sufficient time to recover.

Opinions to the contrary by DNR’s coastal zone staff are based on incorrect data, said Frank Harrod, vice president of Ponchatoula Materials, one of the three dredging firms that operate in the lake.

Albert Poche, president of the Manchac Fishermens Association, said that the bottom is not recovering and that half of the lake has no living adult clams.

Those clams are an important source of food to fish and other aquatic life in the lake, Poche said.

The shell dredging industry does employ people, but the lake also provides important jobs and food from fisheries, he said.

“The lake employs me,” Poche said.

He said the fishing in the lake is an important renewable resource that shouldn’t be wasted.

“For a handful of shells you are risking a billion-dollar industry,” he said.

Poche asked that a hearing be held in Ponchatoula, where fishermen can better attend it.

Alain Seligman, president of Southern Shipbuilding, said that amateur environmentalists are using “innocuous, exaggeration and outright lies” to confuse the issue.

He called them “eco-maniacs” and said they are “somebody’s rich kids who are professional joiners.”

Gordon Florly of the AFL-CIO asked DNR not to further restrict dredging and to take a stand that will reassure those union members who work on dredges that they will still have jobs tomorrow.

Several consultants hired by shell dredging firms said there is no evidence that shell dredging is harming the lake and that any attempt to further restrict the industry would be premature.

The industry has been operating in the lake for 50 years and has not hurt fish production, said Stephen Stjimle, president of a New Orleans environmental engineering firm.

A lot of other environmental factors should be examined in connection with the lake’s environmental problems, said Stjimle.

Among the factors he cited were development around the lake, wetland loss, and effects of waterways such as the Mississippi River golf outlet and the Bonne Carrie Spillway.

“The secretary has made no commitments to any one approach,” aid hearing officer C.H. Mandel.

He said the opinions expressed in the hearings will be taken into consideration in any future regulatory action on dredging.