U.S. to Drop Claim

Partial Tidelands Settlement Is Announced by Edwards

By Edgar Coltharp
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BATON ROUGE — Gov.-elect Edwin Edwards Tuesday announced a partial settlement of the Louisiana Tidelands dispute which he said could bring the state a windfall of up to $100 million.

The federal government, Edwards said, has "agreed in principle" to the release of some 60 square miles of previously contested Tidelands territory near the Mississippi River delta.

He estimated Louisiana could collect at much as $2,500 per acre when the 10,000-acre tract is put up for lease.

Edwards said the mineral resources section of the U.S. Justice Department has agreed to drop federal claim to the area and cooperate with Louisiana's effort to get title to it.

There are still some technical engineering and legal details to be worked out before the state can begin to exploit the area, Edwards said.

"I am advised that the problems to be worked out between the federal and state experts do not appear to be major and can be speedily resolved. They involve purely mathematical computations," Edwards said.

Top Priority

The details, he added, are being given to priority by Louisiana's Tidelands litigation team and technical experts.

Louisiana and the federal government have been embroiled over, the mineral-rich Tidelands for more than two decades. The state staked its claim three leagues (about 10 1/2 miles) out into the Gulf of Mexico. Washington contended Louisiana's rights stopped at the three-mile mark.

The U.S. Supreme Court years ago agreed with the federal argument, but the dispute continued over where to begin counting off the three miles.

This last question is now in the hands of a special master appointed by the high court.

Over the years, about $1.8 billion built up in an escrow fund from oil and gas royalties from the disputed area. The federal government recently got the Supreme Court to release $1 billion that came from areas where Louisiana has no hope of gaining title.

Last month Edwards said he hoped to get as much as $150 million for the state by the same method. The idea was scoffed at, however, by Baton Rouge attorney Victor Sachse, a member of the current tidelands legal team. He said the most Louisiana could hope to realize was $4 million.