Plan to keep swamp unspoiled but usable

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After 40 meetings over the past 12 months, the 75-member Atchafalaya Basin Advisory Committee has come up with a plan Chairwoman Sandra Thompson believes will work if federal and state funding designed to keep the Atchafalaya Basin wet and wild and accessible.

Thompson said the committee’s work over the past year has produced a 200-page state master plan in four major areas — public access, environmental easements, water management, and recreation.

"Up to now, the state of Louisiana has not been on board as a partner in developing this plan," Department of Natural Resources Secretary Jack Caldwell said. "Now, with the guidance of Ms. Thompson and the work of lots of concerned citizens, we have a plan we can take to the state Legislature and get the ball rolling."

Caldwell appointed Thompson, a DNR employee, to head the committee in late 1996. If completely implemented, the Atchafalaya Basin plan will have the state and federal governments owning 250,000 acres, nearly half of the acreage in the sprawling basin. All of this land would be open to the public.

The plan would also include funds for easements on another 320,000 privately owned acres in the basin. Thompson said the easements would limit the liability of landowners and maintain some state and federal control over timber harvest, campsites monitoring and the setting of a policy that no new private campsites will be allowed on state-owned lands.

The plan’s third major aspect outlined by Thompson centers on a long-standing U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project which identifies 13 separate water-management units in the basin.

"The purpose of this part of the plan is to operate and maintain any water management projects which the corps will construct in order to restore, where possible, and to preserve, where feasible, the natural habitat that has made the Atchafalaya Basin a national treasure," Thompson said.

Camps on the list are Buffalo Cove on the basin’s western side and the East Grand Lake area on the east side. The corps has done some preliminary work in the Buffalo Cove area.

The committee suggested that a research center be formed to create a study of the basin’s potential to support the needs of the people who live there.

Fishermen try their luck on Lake Bigueux in the Atchafalaya Basin. Enhancement of recreation is one of the major points in the proposed development plan. It is projected to cost about $338 million over 15 years.

This part of the plan will require a local sponsor, usually the police juries in parishes adjacent to the basin.

Thompson made note of the already heavily traveled west side of the basin, mainly in the Lake Henderson area, and said the plan recommends the enhancement of the area to increase tourism.

The overall Atchafalaya Basin project has been authorized for 11 years by Congress, but lacked necessary state matching funds to trigger subsequent Congressional appropriations of $250 million in federal funds.

The Congress authorization plan requires the state to work hand in hand with the corps in developing the master plan. The corps has already used Congressional appropriations of $30.4 million over the past three years to buy 33,000 acres in the basin. These lands have been purchased from willing sellers and are part of the 50,000 acres required in the agreement between the state and the corps.

Thompson said the remaining 17,000 acres can be obtained in ongoing negotiations over a tract of land north of Flat Lake near Morgan City. She described the area as "old growth cypress, and an area that needs to be preserved in the basin."

The total cost of the plan is estimated at $338 million across 15 years. The majority of that total, $250 million, would come from Corps of Engineers funding. However, corps officials noted the money is "authorized but unfunded." That means Congress has approved the idea, but never included the money.

Caldwell said he plans to meet with U.S. Rep. Chris John, D-Crowley, this week to begin the political effort to get the program included in the corps spending budget.

Caldwell said now that the state has a plan and can offer the Corps of Engineers a spending partner, it should be easier to get funded.

The state would expect to spend a total of about $88 million over 15 years. That would include about $27 million to purchase land and build improvements. The operation and maintenance cost would be $61 million, again spread over 15 years.

Caldwell and Thompson said the Legislature can be sold on the idea once it considers it is only an average of about $5.8 million a year.

While the plan provides the corps with a spending partner, it also requires some parishes to become spending partners with the state. For example, while state and federal money may build a boat ramp, a parish might be required to pay to maintain it.

The corps would pay 100 percent of the acquiring public access, environmental easements and water management parts of the plan with the state paying 25 percent of the maintenance costs. In recreation, the state would pay for 50 percent of the improvements, with state and/or local governments paying for the maintenance.

The DNR now plans to formally unveil the plan at a press conference at the State Capitol on April 23. The public comment period would then begin, and would continue through a series of eight statewide public meetings in September.

The calendar calls for announcement of a final memorandum of agreement between the state and the Corps of Engineers to be signed on July 23.

Caldwell and Thompson said the plan was the work of a diverse group of people who represented government, the environment, special interest groups and interested citizens. Many of the anticipated conflicts were worked out by several working groups that were formed to create the plan, they said.