Proposal threatens Amite plan

By JOAN McKinney
Advocate Washington bureau

WASHINGTON — President Reagan's fiscal 1986 budget proposal sets the stage for a new fight on sharing costs of water projects, including a proposal that local sources pay half the cost of a $600,000 Amite River flood control study.

In previous years, some state and local officials have expressed a willingness to finance the Amite project if it meets continued delay in Washington.

Release of federal funds to three other studies in Louisiana also is linked to greater financial participation by state and local sources under the Reagan budget.

The new cost sharing is proposed for studies of barrier island erosion, water supply needs along Louisiana's coast, and land loss and marsh creation on the coast.

In the past, Congress has ordered start-up studies on those issues without requiring a high financial match from local beneficiaries.

The president's initiatives on cost sharing, however, have the huge $302.8 million Army Corps of Engineers budget proposed for Louisiana is almost all federal money. Regular operations and maintenance along Louisiana's navigable rivers, existing flood and hurricane protection projects, and previously approved studies and construction projects all would be funded by the old formulas.

“The numbers are not that bad” for the state, said one Louisiana

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congressional aide. He said most corps projects in Louisiana keep about the same level of funding they had last year, even though the corps would take about a $450 million cut in its national budget under the Reagan plan.

Only about $1.1 million is the new cost sharing proposed for Louisiana. Most of that is in “the environmental area” that is, the coastal lands and water supply studies — according to an aide to House Appropriations member Rep. Lindy Boggs, D-La.

While the new Louisiana cost sharing would be only a tiny fraction of the corps' total spending in the state, it is the precedent that concerns some water project advocates here.

Nationwide, there has been a stall on starting new projects while Congress and the White House (under then Presidents Carter and Reagan) have fought about cost sharing.

This year, the handful of “new starts” proposed for construction (none in Louisiana) are projects for which local sponsors voluntarily negotiated a cost-sharing arrangement, Boggs' aide said.

Long range, this could be significant for the proposal (still under study) to deepen the Mississippi River shipping channel from New Orleans to Baton Rouge for easier passage of coal traffic.

The two new construction starts for deep-draft harbors proposed by Reagan are those in which ports agreed to pay about 50 percent of the costs, according to Boggs' office.

Over time, the willingness of some ports to negotiate cost-sharing deals might put other ports at a competitive disadvantage for scarce federal construction funds.

The president has proposed $1.25 million for continuing the study of deepening the Mississippi channel, however; and no new local cost sharing would be imposed on that study, according to a fact sheet from the corps.

In Louisiana, Reagan asks local sponsors to meet half the costs of these studies:

- The $600,000 Amite study.
- The $400,000 barrier island erosion study.
- The $512,000 coastal water supply study.
- The $300,000 land loss and marsh creation study.

But Reagan does propose some Louisiana flood control studies, without imposing a new local matching requirement. This would put $1.17 million into ongoing studies of the flood-prone Pearl River Basin in Louisiana and Mississippi; $500,000 in federal study funds into the Bogue-Tensas Basin at the Arkansas-Louisiana line; $130,000 into Eastern Rapids, Aveyelles Parish studies; almost $1 million into advanced engineering studies of flood control in the Mississippi Delta and Louisiana/Mississippi estuarine areas; $250,000 for flood damage studies on Lake Pontchartrain's west shore; and $160,000 for the same studies in Bayou Teche and along the Mermentau, Vermilion and Calcasieu rivers.

Navigation studies, without a new required local “match,” are proposed for Bayou LaFourche and Lafourche-Jump Waterway and for a Louisiana-Texas stretch of the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.

The president also has asked to continue, at $311,000, a study of preventing flood damage to water and land resources in the Atchafalaya Basin, $26.3 million for construction of Basin flood control projects, and $7.6 million for operation of existing flood control works there. He does not seek new local cost-sharing for these expenditures.

Flood control in the Basin is a previously authorized project, although Louisiana Congress members do seek new authorization for expanding that project to include more land acquisition, public access and habitat protection features.

Other big items for Louisiana in the proposed corps budget are:

- About $38 million for ongoing construction and for regular operations and maintenance along the Mississippi River shipping channel from Baton Rouge to the Gulf, and another $1.6 million for work at the river's Gulf Outlet;
- $90 million for continued construction of the Red River waterway (roughly the same amount Reagan proposed and Congress approved last year);
- $47 million for strengthening the Old River Control structure and another $5.3 million for operations and maintenance there.
- $1.9 million for construction of the Tensas Basin Red River flood control project, and $6.5 million for building the Cacodrie Pumping Station in the Tensas Basin.