Work Could Be Begun Next Year To Afford Red River Navigation

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Construction could get under way early next year on the first section of work on making the Red River navigable in Louisiana, opening up vast areas of the state to access to the Mississippi River.

Congress has authorized much of the overall project estimated to cost around $900 million, but it has not appropriated any funds for construction.

Col. Richard H. Hunt, district engineer for the Army Corps of Engineers in New Orleans, said a joint House-Senate committee has approved a $1.2 million appropriation to begin work on the Red River navigation from the Mississippi River to Shreveport.

However, it still needs final approval and signing into law.

On another front, the Corps of Engineers plans to file a detailed impact environmental statement with the Council of Environmental Quality in December. It is a step that must be made, before a shovel of dirt is lifted.

Also as part of the program, the corps held three public hearings last week — in Jefferson, Tex.; Shreveport, and Alexandria.

Ecological Warnings

At the hearings, some environmentalists cautioned the project might cause ecological damage. The Louisiana Wildlife Federation, for instance, went on record at Alexandria as not opposing the project, but said its members would keep close watch on it and would reserve the right to protest in the future any phase of the project it may feel is detrimental to the ecology.

At the Shreveport hearing, J. B. Reynolds — who represented the Missouri Pacific Railroad Co. — said that the navigation would work an economic hardship to the present transportation facilities in the state. He said the area also is adequately served by transportation facilities.

Several civic and governmental groups in the area, however, spoke in favor of the project.

The overall project — as authorized but not funded by Congress — includes four sections. They are:

One — Navigation and bank stabilization on the Red River from the Mississippi River to Shreveport, a distance of about 210 miles.

Two — Navigation from Shreveport to Daingerfield, Tex., on 12 Mile Bayou and Cypress Bayou, a distance of about 84 miles.

Three — Bank stabilization on the Red River from Shreveport to Index, Ark. No navigation is authorized so far.

Four — Bank stabilization on the Red River from Index, Ark., to the Denison Dam in Denison, Tex. No navigation is planned at present.

Also at the Alexandria meeting, an offical of the Louisiana Department of Public Works suggested that the corps give early consideration to building the first two locks to make it completely navigable from the Mississippi River to the Alexandria area.

Cresap Assessment

Dan Cresap, chief engineer of the Louisiana Department of Public Works, said if the idea is accepted, planning for the remainder can go ahead while the locks are constructed. One would be about 10 miles from the Red River junction with Black River and the second about 40 miles south of Alexandria.

Hunt said that the corps is weighing various opinions and requests at the hearings.

He said that it appears the first construction will primarily deal with channel alignment and bank stabilization on some of the area from the Mississippi River to Shreveport.

For instance, channels will be cut through large, meandering bends, making the pathway of the river straighter and creating an oxbow lake in what was the bend.

Hunt said this would make the oxbow lakes prime fishing areas. He said studies from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service showed that fishing in the whole area will be improved. He said the government also will create picnic and camping facilities at each of the locks and dams.

Under an earlier program, 31 miles of the Red River which is near the Mississippi River is currently navigable.

Hunt said five locks and dams are to be constructed to make the 210 miles navigable from the Mississippi River to Shreveport.

Four more dams will be built in other parts of the project.

Hunt said a benefit of the program on bank stabilization and channel alignment would be to greatly lower the 1,000 acres of good farmland that at present go down the river in form of silt each year. He said this would improve the water quality as well, by removing the sediment. In addition, engineers also are working to reduce the salt content that stems from deposits picked up by the river in Oklahoma and Texas.