Concerned that plans to protect the Atchafalaya Basin have been abandoned, Gov. Buddy Roemer has asked Louisiana’s congressional delegation to force the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to abide by a compromise plan agreed to a decade ago.

In what was probably the biggest Louisiana environmental issue of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the various sides agreed to a plan under which the government would purchase basin property rights that would help “keep the Atchafalaya Basin wet and wild,” as common bumper stickers of that time requested.

Now Roemer says the corps has “abandoned the Compromise Real Estate Plan which was formulated nearly 10 years ago by landowners, environmental groups, the state of Louisiana and federal agencies,” and is purchasing rights that will be less protective of the unique basin, which is the country’s largest bottomland hardwood swamp.

A basin landowner could accept federal funds for the environmental easement and then cut down nearly all of the trees on the land without being in violation of the easement, according to Roemer.

In a Monday letter to members of the congressional delegation, Roemer asks them “to reaffirm the Congressional directive to acquire a comprehensive easement consistent with the Compromise Real Estate Plan originally authorized by Congress, and to provide authorization for a long-term (i.e., 5 to 10 years) appropriation schedule to ensure that such an easement acquisition is completed.”

Roemer wrote a letter of complaint to the corps on April 8, but said he has “yet to receive a reply, but I suspect that the corps will not readily readopt the Compromise Real Estate Plan unless specifically directed by Congress to do so.”

The corps adopted its “considerably less protective easement without consulting the state of Louisiana or any other parties to the Compromise Plan.”
In an interview at the time, Col. Richard Gorskiof the corps said that was an oversight 'and the easements would be re-evaluated. The easements are supposed to be rights purchased from landowners that allow government to protect the hardwood swamp. But the corps revised the language in the easements, without the state's approval, and the easements no longer provide the protection agreed to by landowners, environmental groups and governmental agencies that was described in the recommended plan transmitted to Congress by the chief of engineers on Feb. 28, 1983,' Roemer said.

While one of the intents of the interagency group was to protect forests and wildlife habitat, Roemer said, "a landowner could simply leave one or a few merchantable trees on his property to avoid having his timber harvesting operation being considered clear-cutting."

"The right to retain floodwaters by artificial means is critical to implementation of water management units in the Atchafalaya Basin," Roemer said, but the revised easements don't provide that right.

Without implementation of the management plans, Roemer said, "thousands of acres of lakes in the basin will dry up and thousands of acres of seasonally flooded woodlands will no longer flood. That periodic flooding is important to the basin's vegetation and wildlife."

The 575,000-acre Atchafalaya Basin is home to eagles, ducks and hundreds of other species of birds. It also provides habitat for bear, fox and numerous other animals. The language for the original easements was agreed upon by various environmental groups and governmental agencies agreed 10 years ago on an easement plan that would cost an estimated $100 million. Now the corps has come up with a revised plan that doesn't offer the protection and would cost $30 million less.

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