NEW IBERIA — A member of the Greater Atchafalaya Basin Commission told Iberia jurors yesterday that a plan to drain the Atchafalaya Basin will result in the rapid filling in of East and West Cote Blanche Bay and Vermilion Bay.

Russell Ruiz told the jurors that the Corps of Engineers proposes that the Atchafalaya be drained through Charenton Canal, which empties into West Cote Blanche Bay: Wax Lake Outlet, which empties into the western part of the Atchafalaya Bay and through the mouth of the Atchafalaya River. The EPA's plan will not solve the problem of the rapid build up of sediment (sand and mud brought down by the Atchafalaya River) in the Basin and in the bay outlets Ruiz said.

The plan proposes making the Wax Lake Outlet the main channel for draining the Atchafalaya, because, Ruiz said, the mouth of the Atchafalaya is already so silted up that outflow is being cutback. He argued that this will only speed up sedimentation all the way into Vermilion Bay.

Public hearings will be held on the proposed plan late this summer, according to the Corps of Engineers.

A decision on whether or not this plan will be implemented will be made this year, Ruiz said.

"The whole problem is contained in one word — sedimentation," he said. "Until they find a way to spread it out over the Gulf, we'll continue to have this problem."

Ruiz asked jurors if they realized what difficulty they will have in maintaining the channel from the Port of Iberia through Vermilion Bay and out Southwest Pass with sediment building up in Vermilion Bay.

Ruiz said he has an alternate proposal to the plan — building a jetty 35 miles out into the Gulf so that the sediment draining down through the Atchafalaya is channeled far out into the Gulf and eventually dumped off the Continental Shelf.

Unless this is done, he said, sedimentation will continue hurting Louisiana's offshore crab, shrimp and oyster industry and will ruin the Basin as well.