State board works to keep Basin businesses afloat

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LAFAYETTE — The Department of Natural Resources will work to keep existing businesses open along the Atchafalaya Basin Protection Levee, even if the land gets sold to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The St. Martin Land Co. in May offered to sell an additional 15,000 acres of land south of Interstate 10 in Henderson to the Army Corps of Engineers, which would have violated a federal cap on land acquisition in the Atchafalaya Basin.

The department asked Congress, however, to lift the SO,000-acre cap. The corps has purchased 47,000 acres in order to control flood waters in the Mississippi River floodplain.

The cap was mandated in 1985 to prevent the federal government from grabbing more land than necessary for flood control. The additional land purchase could affect about 15 businesses in the Henderson area.

Resources department officials said they have a verbal agreement with the St. Martin Land Co. In the agreement, St. Martin Land is to sell the land to lease holders, who in turn will have control over it, said Sandra Decoteau, executive director of DNR’s Atchafalaya Basin Program.

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purchase of 10,000 acres north of I-10 in Henderson temporarily disrupted the hunting season, angering area residents who hunted or profited from the sport. The corps later opened the area to hunting.

“The hunters were not at the table when the decision was made,” said Maura Wood, Sierra Club spokesperson, who attended Wednesday’s meeting. “But when the corps listened to the what they had to say, something was worked out.”

Temporary boundary signs, separating private from federal property, are being posted on the land.

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which will be open for hunting this year.

Wood said all of the people who are interested in the proposed land purchase are now talking.

“Issues of public access are important to a lot of people,” Wood said. “The corps needs to be sensitive to the wide number of users. I think there is a huge effort now to get everybody together.”

Mark Allemond, co-owner of McGee’s Landing on the levee, agrees.

“Henderson Lake is the main outlet for tours in the Basin,” Allemond said. “There has been a lot of dialogue on how to make this a win-win situation and to make sure businesses are not left high and dry.”

After the purchase, the corps will dredge part of the lake to create channels for better navigability. Some areas of the lake are now blocked by sediment preventing access to some areas, Allemond said.

Congress has not yet taken action on the corps’ request to lift the cap, said Decoteau.

Pavement of the 25 miles of levee road from Lake Fausse Pointe to Henderson is also moving forward. The St. Martin Land Co. has given the right-of-way to the Department of Transportation and Development. The project will cost $5 million.