BUFFALO COVE - George Guidry and Rene Gilbert lazily fish under moss-draped cypress deep in the Atchafalaya River Basin at Buffalo Cove, seemingly unaware of the recreation controversy swirling around them. (AP Wirephoto)

INTERSTATE CROSSING HENDERSON - Interstate 10, under construction, cuts a path through the swamps at Henderson, La., which is part of the Atchafalaya River Basin. Controversy is swirling around the proposed declaration of a part of the basin for a public recreation area. (AP Wirephoto)

'LAST SWAMPY WILDERNESS'

State Controversy Cresting Over Atchafalaya Basin

Editor's note - The Atchafalaya River Basin has been called the greatest hardwood forest in North America and the last swampy wilderness in the country. Controversy is swirling around the proposed declaration of a part of the basin for a public recreation area. Here is the first of a two-part series about the controversy.

By DAVE STEINBERG
Associated Press Writer

HENDERSON, La. (AP) - Under moss-covered cypress deep in the Atchafalaya River Basin, George Guidry and Rene Gilbert fish, unconcerned over the recreation controversy swirling around them.

The controversy is clear on the surface - should a large portion of bayous and lakes in the basin be declared a public recreation area?

The deeper questions are murky as the waters of Buffalo Cove where Guidry and Gilbert fish - could the proposal be compatible with the current hunting and fishing, the timber harvesting, the oil and gas exploration and the wishes of private landowners? Could landowners retain mineral rights if the proposed area came under federal control?

Moot Point

The very existence of the swampy wilderness may be at a crossroads if silt deposits from the river continue to drain the swamp.

Battle lines are difficult to draw. Interested parties agree on some points, vehemently disagree on others.

Involved are the sportsman, the conservationist, the forest owner, the commercial crawfishermen and several state and federal agencies.

The controversial area is located in the central and southwestern part of the banana-shaped river basin which runs through south-central Louisiana.

590,000 Acres

It is bounded by highways on the north and south. Interstate 10 cuts through it. Roughly 500,000 acres, it encompasses 60 per cent of the total basin.

The river draws off some of the Mississippi River's flow. A fast, deep river, the Atchafalaya winds down 125 miles through the heart of French-speaking Acadia Country to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Commission on the Atchafalaya Basin, set up by the governor in May, meets Friday to come up with a public recreation plan that is acceptable to all interests and "benefits the state." What Gov. John J. McKeithen does with the recommendations would presumably guide decisions on the future of the designated area.

The 1971 legislature urged the governor and the commission to protect private property, timber and mineral rights and to let them be expropriated by the federal government if the fight comes to that.

In contrast, the 1970 legislature passed a resolution which "endorsed to Congress the creation of the Atchafalaya Basin for use as a National Recreation Area."

The history of the basin has helped define facts in the controversy.

Most of the basin was once chock full of swamps, lakes and dry knolls where the Chitimacha Indians had lived. White men planted sugar cane and cut and sawed hardwood trees for market in the 19th century.

Swamps were preserved by the river's natural ebb and flow.

In 1927, the Mississippi River...

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