Two-year halt called on new shell dredging

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor

Gov. Edwards issued a two-year moratorium on new shell dredging contracts and permits Monday, while a study determines the effect of shell dredging on coastal erosion. The moratorium does not outlaw any current operations but could result in their being shut down if environmental groups are successful in a suit to have current contracts voided for failure to follow state bid laws, said Harold Schoeffler, one of the environmentalists who met with Edwards on Monday prior to his announcement.

A separate suit by the attorney general and environmental groups could have the same effect by voiding the dredging permits for lack of an environmental impact statement, Schoeffler said.

Environmentalists have charged that shell dredging companies have destroyed the valuable barrier reefs that help protect the coastline from eroding and are creating holes in Atchafalaya Bay, which is one of the few areas where delta is being built.

Other environmental groups are concerned about dredging in Lake Pontchartrain and Lake Maurepas. They allege that dredging causes the lakes to become muddy and hurts both commercial and sport fishing.

Shell dredging companies say their work causes no environmental damage of any consequence.

"There will be a moratorium on any new shell dredging leases pending the outcome of a study to determine the effect on the coastline," Edwards said in an impromptu news conference at the mansion.

Edwards spokeswoman Meg Curtis said later that the Legislature will be asked to pass a joint resolution supporting the moratorium and asking for a special committee to study the shell dredging question.

That committee will be made up of personnel from the Department of Natural Resources, she said.

Asked if present dredging should be stopped, Edwards said:

"I'm not prepared to say that is what we should do. That's what the study is all about."

Schoeffler said Edwards was unwilling to cancel the current shell dredging contracts, because such action would put the state in a precarious legal position. But he added that Edwards is aware of the effect the moratorium would have if the environmental groups win one of their two law suits.

Schoeffler said the moratorium gives environmentalists "two possibilities of putting the shell dredgers out of business," referring to the two suits.

Shell dredgers say they have operated in a responsible manner and are providing more than 500 Louisiana jobs and an important product to the state.