Water from the Mississippi River rushes through the Low Sill Structure during high water in the spring of 1997. Sportsmen and commercial fishermen want more water in the Atchafalaya Basin, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is considering releasing more in the spring.

Dave Parker of Lafayette remembers a time, only a decade ago, when catching 50 bass a day in the Atchafalaya Basin wasn’t uncommon. “A bad trip was eight or 10 bass,” he said. “We haven’t had that since the early ’90s.” Parker said the basin is choking for lack of water. The high spring floods no longer inundate the 1-million-acre basin. “People say ‘low water,’ but I call it no water,” Parker said. “The swamps are in bad shape.” He said vegetation is growing where open water prevailed in years past. Parker said additional flow from the Mississippi River would benefit the basin.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is reviewing its distribution of water at the Old River Control Structures, studying the possibility of diverting more Mississippi River water into the Atchafalaya Basin in the spring. That’s according to Sandra Thompson Decoteau, director of the Atchafalaya Basin program under the state Department of Natural Resources.

Decoteau said the corps has agreed to examine the issue of water distribution, increasing the flow in early spring. “But they say they would have to take it back in the late summer,” she said.

Decoteau said the corps insists on maintaining an annual average of 30 percent of the Mississippi River allowed to branch off into the Atchafalaya River through the Old River Control Structures and a hydroelectric power plant on the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and Natchez.

The Old River Control Structure, completed in 1963, was built to prevent the Mississippi River from carving a new route to the Gulf of Mexico through the Atchafalaya Basin.
The Auxiliary Structures regulate the flow of Mississippi River water into the Atchafalaya River at the Old River Control Structures. Bryan questions Corps of Engineers’ methods for gauging the water levels of the two rivers.

Old River Control Structures and Atchafalaya Basin

Atchafalaya River: The need of 1973 damaged the existing levees and structures, necessitating the construction of an auxiliary structure to contain the Mississippi in check. After crawfishermen complained in the spring of that year about low bass water levels, the corps increased the amount of water diverted into the Atchafalaya from the Mississippi by 2 percent during a two-week period in May. According to figures provided by the corps, however, that increase was later offset by a slightly decreased diversion.

The corps insists that an annual average of 30 percent of the Atchafalaya was maintained by law under federal flood control acts. "Until Congress changes the law, that's the way it's going to be," said Burrell Thibodaux of the LSU Professor Fred Bryan explains how Mississippi River water is diverted into the Atchafalaya River at the Old River Control Structures. Bryan questions Corps of Engineers’ methods for gauging the water levels of the two rivers.

"The best thing we've got working for us is the resiliency of Mother Nature," he said. "We've got to work with her, not against her."