Wetland research center growing

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LAFAYETTE — A $22 million expansion to help scientists research viable solutions to restore Louisiana's vanishing wetlands is planned for the National Research Wetlands Center in UL Lafayette's University Research Park.

The annex will allow for an expansion of the center's work, which has tended to be more biological, said Thomas Casadevall, U.S. Geological Survey central regional director. Scientists assigned to the new annex will conduct research in the areas of hydrology and geology, he said.

The integrated science center will focus its research on "how to provide the sciences that will be needed to underpin the enormous task of the restoration," Casadevall said.

Congress appropriated about $1.4 million to UL Lafayette for the design of the expansion. On Wednesday, Ray Authement, UL Lafayette president, handed over a check for the initial planning phase to Casadevall, but Congress has not yet funded the estimated $22 million it will take to build the nearly 80,000-square-foot building.

"We don't do this very often," joked Authement as he handed Casadevall the envelope for about $385,000, the first installment of the congressional funds appropriated for the expansion's design.

Authement talked about the loss of the state's wetlands in his hometown of Boudreaux Canal, along the coast near Chauvin in Terrebonne Parish.

"Where we hunted and played (ball), it's all gone," Authement said. "We've got to convince Washington that our wetlands must be saved."

Rehabilitation of Louisiana's wetlands will boost Lafayette's economy, said Gregg Gothreaux, president and chief executive officer of the Lafayette Economic Development Authority. The expansion is expected to create about 200 jobs within the next 10 years.

"The impact of that number of scientific workers is much more significant than people realize," Gothreaux said. "The average salary is above $50,000 a year and the impact of that is no different than a larger corporation" moving into the area.

"Hopefully it's an opportunity for local scientists to stay local and continue the work that they love, which is precious to (the) ecology here in Louisiana," he said.

The research center was built in the University Research Park in 1992. After the doors opened, researchers began building relationships with the university and other federal agencies, said center director Bill Stewart.

The expansion comes in the midst of two other developments in the park — a hotel that doubles as an interactive classroom for hospitality management students, and a technology center with visualization "caves" that allow researchers to step into their data.

The design phase for the addition to the National Wetlands Research Center is expected to be complete by 2005.

By that time, it is hoped the congressional funding will have been approved, Casadevall said.