Wetlands bill affects Basin project

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WASHINGTON — U.S. Interior Secretary William Clark says a wetlands bill pending in Congress would give the federal government authority to help buy land in Louisiana's Atchafalaya Basin; and, if it passes, he "would hope to initiate a limited federal acquisition effort."

Clark said he would not ask Congress to fatten Interior's fiscal 1985 budget for the Atchafalaya Basin project, and, instead, would use "available funds" within the budget request already sent to Capitol Hill.

In a letter to U.S. Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, D-La., Clark alludes to the risky politics of seeking "any immediate add-on" to the department's total budget proposal, because "there could be significant pitfalls in prematurely displacing identified priorities in the 1985 budget."

Instead, Clark wrote, passage of the pending wetlands bill would give the Interior Department some new powers to buy lands, and "we will have more flexibility to initiate a meaningful federal acquisition program in the Atchafalaya Basin."

Using the pending bill also negates the need for a time-consuming, separate authorization bill for the Basin project alone.

"Such an approach would also give us the flexibility to address local concerns regarding a federal presence in the area," Clark said.

The last comment apparently reflects Clark's conclusion that, under the pending wetlands bill, Interior can buy wetlands not subject to all of the extremely narrow land usages under other Interior Department programs.

A compromise agreement for sale of private lands into a protected Basin area permits some public access, hunting, and commercial fisheries, timbering and minerals' activities in some areas. Reportedly, landowners also insist that Louisiana—not federal—law will control, should the federal government ever abandon the Basin project. This is related to landowners' desire to retain minerals rights in the future.

Clark's letter does not commit the Reagan administration to an exact funding level for Basin acquisitions.

However, it appears to be the answer Johnston hoped for in several areas, specifically in Clark's endorsements of the pending wetlands bill as a vehicle for the Basin project, the intent to begin funding the project soon and the decision not to force the Louisiana project through its own, more time-consuming authorization and appropriation processes.