Witnesses to reef destruction sought

By BOB ANDERSON
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The attorney general's office has sent questionnaires seeking witnesses to the destruction of reefs that form part of an important state boundary for oil and gas revenues.

Also Thursday, the office asked LSU's Center for Wetland Resources to come up with a proposal to study the remnants of the reefs in an attempt to determine what happened to them.

Fishermen and shrimpers say that only a few of the reefs remain in the once tight Point au Fer chain. The reefs allow the state to extend its boundary and claim valuable oil and gas royalties.

State officials say they want to find out how many of the reefs are left and what happened to those that have disappeared.

The question has risen from controversy over coastal shell dredging, although state officials say the demise of the reefs could be from other causes, including oil and gas operations, hurricanes or natural subsidence.

A spokesman for the dredging companies says the companies can prove they have not violated an agreement with the state not to dredge the boundary reefs.

So far the attorney general's office has sent 25 questionnaires to people who may have information on reef destruction.

The office is seeking eyewitnesses — hopefully people with pictures, and records of dates and places where reef destruction occurred.

"We understand there are people with pictures," said Gary Keyser, who heads the attorney general's natural resources division.

Attorney General William Guste "has become very concerned about the importance of this problem, and has instructed me to gather evidence," Keyser said.

If people or companies can be identified as the destructors of the reefs, Keyser said he hopes to be able to couple eyewitness testimony with technical information from LSU on how the reefs were destroyed to make a sound legal case.

Keyser said he talked Thursday with LSU and was told that university researchers could provide various types of information from remote sensing to actual physical surveys.

Earlier Keyser indicated that funding such a project may present problems, but a citizens group said Thursday they have offered the state the use of all boats and barges it will need to conduct a survey of the reefs.

"If the state doesn't do it, we're going to do it ourselves," said Richard Hayes, president of Save Our Coast Inc.

Hayes confirmed that he is helping the attorney general's office distribute questionnaires to shrimpers and fishermen who have pictures and navigational readings of reef destruction.

The two-page questionnaires ask for (See SHELLS, Page 4B) col.2-6

Shells

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personal knowledge of dredging of Rabbit Island, White Shell Reef, Nickell Reef, Eugene Island, vegetated areas of Atchafalaya Bay and the area between Point au Fer and Marsh Island.

It also asks if the witnesses have pictures of activities that damaged the reefs.

The federal government can act at any time to reopen the legal battle of where Louisiana's three-mile mineral rights limit ends, state officials say.

If the federal government is successful in proving the state's boundary back from the Point au Fer Reefs to the line it previously used, the change could cut out rich gas fields and cost millions of dollars in royalties each year, according to members of the state mineral board.

There are only three reefs that still just above the water level, according to shrimpman John Mialjevic, who said that in the 1960s there were just a few places that a boat could get through the tight line of reefs.

In the 1950s the federal government drew what has commonly been called the Chapman line as the boundary for the state. In the Atchafalaya Bay area, that line ran from Marsh Island to Point Chevreuil, which did not include a large portion of what is now within the state boundary.