

## **May 31, 2012 Atchafalaya Meetings Report**

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### **April 24, 2012: FOA Annual Meeting**

The Friends of the Atchafalaya annual Membership meeting was held at Bluebonnet Public Library on Tuesday, April 24, 2012 at 6:30 PM.

More than a hundred people attended, including a large number of Landscape Architecture students from LSU.

Three presentations were featured.

Charles Caillouet, Founding Member of FOA and veteran Basin-watcher, gave summaries of the history of the Basin, the operation of the Floodway system, and the current status of the ecology in the Floodway.

Jim Delahoussaye, another Founding Member, retired biologist and commercial fisherman, and cultural archaeologist, talked about an archaeological site in the Basin that exhibits strange midden contents, indicating an unusual diet of the inhabitants.

Debra Credeur, Executive Director of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area, brought everyone up to date on the development of the Heritage Area and its newly approved Management Plan, and the current and planned activities of the Area.

The 2012 officers of the FOA were presented to the membership. They are President Charles Fryling, Vice-President Jim Delahoussaye and Secretary/Treasurer Charles Caillouet.

Other members of the Board of Directors are Ray Brassieur, Lu Cutrera, Carolyn Delahoussaye, Willie Fontenot and Alice Miller.

### **April 24, 2012: FOA Board Meeting**

In conjunction with the FOA Annual meeting, the Friends also held a Board of Directors meeting to review progress on a grant application being developed for the Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Louisiana Foundation "Challenge for a Healthier Louisiana" Program. The goal of the grant is to continue the work begun by the Atchafalaya Basin Program with the Lower St. Martin Parish Recreation District to improve recreation opportunities for the communities adjacent to the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway and to reinforce the connection between outdoor activity in the Basin and a healthy and productive population. Recognition of the connections between a sustainable environment and the healthy outdoor culture embedded in the heritage of many of the inhabitants is a key element of the grant application. A central element is the development of a curriculum that can encourage the next generation to remain healthy and keep our environment strong and resilient.

The Board was impressed with the work of Lu Cutrera and the project team from St. Martin and St. Mary parishes that are working to put the project together. Partners include the Recreation District, St. Martin Parish government, Stephenville School, Tri-City Track Club, 4-H Club and the LSU Ag Center, Morgan City High School, and Boy Scouts.

The application has since been submitted and is being evaluated by the grantors. Information on the awards should be available this summer.

## May 15, 2012: ABP TAG Meeting

The Technical Advisory Group of the Atchafalaya Basin Program (ABP) met on May 15, 2012 at the LaSalle Building in Downtown Baton Rouge. Members of the Group are specified in ABP legislation and represent the agencies involved in studying and managing the areas in the Floodways.

Dr. Paul Kemp of Audubon Coastal Initiative gave an update on the completion of the first phase of the development of the Hydrodynamic Model of the Atchafalaya Floodways. Through private grant funding, Audubon has led the effort to create a model of the Floodways which can work with the models being used and developed by the US Army Corps of Engineers for the Mississippi River. The results of calibration against observed spring 2011 flood data and further verified against low water conditions later in the year. The output of the model seems to be quite useful at this early stage of development. The intent of the modeling effort was to get a basic capability up and running and then to add detail and additional function to allow analysis of proposed changes to operation and anticipated water events in the Floodways.

Representatives of the New Orleans District of the Corps of Engineers provided an update on the status of the Buffalo Cove restoration project. The project was pushed aside after Hurricane Katrina because of the priorities assigned to rebuilding the flood protection system in New Orleans. During the down-time, including the significant high water event of 2011, some of the features that had been completed or had received substantial work, were damaged and required repairs. The Corps has decided that these are not maintenance problems because the project was never completed so they are being reviewed and construction is now scheduled to begin again in late 2012 with the re-construction of damaged features and hopefully completion of other un-constructed features. Several members of the TAG noted that a review of the current conditions and differences from the original plan would be in order.

The Corps is also working to improve the conditions of pipelines across the Floodway and on the the Henderson and Atchafalaya Recreation Environmental Impact Statements.

ABP Staff presented a legislative update, including imminent changes to the TAG appointment process, which has been delayed in the past by problems getting legislators together to review the appointments. The changes will streamline the process and facilitate appointments when vacancies occur. The ABP 2013 Annual Plan was approved by the legislature, however there is no new money in the Capital Outlay Budget so the Program will be working with existing funding and will not be able to start new projects unless more funding is provided.

ABP Staff also reported on the status of funded water projects under the ABP.

Dog Leg Canal Maintenance Dredging: Bids were scheduled to be opened in May with completion expected in late 2012.

Henderson Channels Dredging - Four boat launches and a marina site are scheduled to receive new access channels, which will make water control of the lake less of a hardship to operators along the "Boulevard". Upon completion of the channel dredging, annual water level reduction is planned for each of the next five years, in order to allow more effective control of the invasive hydrilla plants by the LA Wildlife and Fisheries Department.

Bayou Fourche work is now in the engineering design stage.

The Cocodrie Swamp channel adjustments are being reviewed. Three alternatives were evaluated and all came in too expensive, so a new "lite" version of the original TAG recommendation is being developed.

The upper end East Grand Lake Study in the 2010 plan has been completed and the study is being extended to the lower end, as was originally planned. Engineering recommendations are being developed. It is not clear when funding will become available for construction of the currently identified features and any new recommendations.

Work Canal gaps to introduce more water into Upper Grand Flats and opening of the lower entrance from Upper Grand River have been proposed and discussions are underway with the landowner.

The blockage of Brown Bayou is being addressed. The landowner has proposed replacing culverts with larger ones and ABP staff is awaiting plans from the landowner. The claims of ownership changed after the State Land Office reviewed information and there is no resolution of the issue as of now. Several individuals and organizations have voiced concern and opposition to the culvert plans because they represent an acknowledgment that the blockage of natural bayous will be allowed.

The opening of a location canal north of Bayou Sorrel was supported by the landowner but engineering studies revealed problems with the depth of pipeline[s] in the canal. An alternative has been proposed to dredge a natural bayou and install a culvert and slide gate on Bayou Pigeon, which is currently dammed. Several members of the committee voiced concern about creating a new active gate which would require ongoing maintenance to deal with the problems.

Related to the location canal problem noted above, Energy XXI is proposing to cut off the Santa Fe pipeline canal at a drilling barge canal to prevent continual sedimentation of canals to the west of the intersections. TAG members agreed that there was not a problem with the Energy XXI proposal but that it would not address the original issue. More study is needed to deal with the water quality problems in the area.

### **May 16, 2012: Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA)**

One of the agenda items at the May CPRA meeting addressed the management of Old River Control Structure water flow.

Stephen Chustz and Dr. Paul Kemp reviewed the history of the Atchafalaya River and the Old River Control Structure and noted the unpredictable nature of water levels in the rivers.

Nominal operation of the structures calls for 70% of the "latitude flow", or the combined volume of the Red and Mississippi Rivers at Old River to be maintained in the Mississippi toward Baton Rouge and New Orleans, and the remaining 30% to be diverted down the Atchafalaya. This ratio is reviewed and maintained daily by the Corps of Engineers through the control structures and the Sidney Murray Hydroelectric Plant.

Water levels vary widely from year to year and 2012 is a good example. May levels ranged down to approximately 4.5 feet NGVD (above mean sea level) at the Butte LaRose gage although the long term average level for that time of year is close to 15 feet and just one year ago, the gage went to 23 feet near the same time of year.

It was also noted that the Governor had requested additional water through the Old River Control Structure based on the low flow during crawfish season, but that the Corps had rejected the request as outside the parameters for effective use of water. [That judgement was apparently based on the fact that attempting to increase flow at low stages is not effective at getting much water anywhere outside the main channel, largely because of the design of the floodway for maximum delivery of water at high stages. This is a continuing problem that contributes to poor water quality in most of the floodway.]

There are now plans in work to establish a working group that will review parameters for making decisions on water management. The last effort at developing such a plan resulted in the 2002 "Water in the Basin Committee" Recommendations to the Governor.

Dr. Kemp noted that the Atchafalaya River was born in about the 15th century. Until that time, the Red went directly to the Gulf, but the Mississippi diverted into the Red and broke the Red into two parts, the lower portion becoming the Atchafalaya River. He also noted that the origin of the "70/30 split" was a finding in 1952 by LSU professor H. N. Fisk that, without intervention, the Atchafalaya would eventually capture the Mississippi.

Dr. Kemp also noted that allowing more than 80% of the combined flow down the Mississippi could also be a problem during some conditions because the design limit on the Low Sill Structure, the primary control structure in the Old River system, is approximately 22 feet of stage differential (head).

Dr. Kemp proposes that we now have the tools to more effectively manage the flow through the Atchafalaya for water and sediment control and we should look at the criteria in light of the needs of the entire Atchafalaya/Mississippi/Coastal environment.

CPRA Chairman Garret Graves asked Dr. Kemp if he had a position on the optimum flow ratio between the rivers. Kemp declined to pick a number but suggested that the 70:30 ratio should only apply at high water stages and that research might show ecological or other criteria driving parameters more appropriate for lower stages.

There are other issues in the Mississippi River at low water stages that also need to be accommodated, like navigation depths and the intrusion of salt water up the channel at low flow rates.

CPRA member John Barry agreed that the Atchafalaya needs a "new look" and noted that the Corps is also being criticized for restrictive water management on the Missouri, aggravating flooding in some areas after spring thaws. The application of a more complete understanding of the effects and limitations of management regimes, both on people and wildlife, could lead to better decision making all along the Mississippi watershed.

### **May 23, 2012: Atchafalaya Trace Commission Regular Meeting**

The Atchafalaya Trace Commission is the managing entity of the Atchafalaya National Heritage Area.

Executive Director Debra Credeur unveiled an updated web site for the Heritage Area, with additional information on recreational opportunities; placeholders for additional curriculum documents for teachers; cultural, historical, and environmental information on the Basin; a connection to the National Park Service Passport Program; an improved event calendar; and updated information on the Heritage Area administration and management, including plan documents.

Dir. Credeur also updated the Commission on the status of other projects in work:

The NPS Passport Program is in effect at three Jean Lafitte National Heritage Program Cultural Centers and staff is researching the possibility of adding passport stamping capability at the three state welcome centers in the Heritage Area.

Signage on the interstate highways should be completed and installed by July 2012, bringing to 265 the total number of Heritage Area signs deployed around the 14 parishes.

The Heritage Area promotional video has been translated into French and is available for distribution to schools and international markets.

The educational curriculum is being edited.

The LA Bicentennial Cypress Tree project proceeds with LA Purchase Cypress Legacy and has identified six trees in the Heritage Area that were standing in 1812. The trees will be identified on the LA Bicentennial web site with a link to [Atchafalaya.org](http://Atchafalaya.org). There will be a recognition ceremony for the tree at the Jean Lafitte NHP Barataria Preserve on June 19, 2012 at 10:30 AM.

ANHA Staff are coordinating with Vicksburg and Natchez National Park Superintendents to collaborate on 2013 Civil War site recognition events.

A new LA Birding Guide, supported by and in partnership with the birding community, is under development and was approved for funding by the Commission.

Ideas for signature a Heritage Area project are under review and all parishes should be thinking about trails, tours and attraction connections that might be appropriate if and when a Heritage Area-wide undertaking is proposed.

Commissioners noted upcoming events in their parishes and the meeting was adjourned.