

False River drawdown plan irks residents

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The Pointe Coupee Parish Police Jury in its ongoing effort to restore False River plans another man-induced drawdown of the oxbow lake, which will see its water level drop by up to 6 feet over a four-month period later this year.

But some property own-

ers who live along the lake's 22-mile-long shoreline are irate about the plan, citing a rash of bulkhead failures on their properties they say were caused by the last time a drawdown was done in 2014.

Lakeside landowners like Rick Falgout are vehemently against the Police Jury doing it again this year. He said the concerns of property owners

about damage to their seawalls have fallen on deaf ears.

"People have no voice," said Falgout, who has lived along False River for more than 40 years. "It really doesn't make a difference how we feel. They don't care about the citizens — period."

Patricia Schnur, president of the False River Civic Association, says she's not happy

about it either but refuses to get riled up because there is little residents can do about it.

"We stated the same concerns we always have but it's a done deal," Schnur said. "It doesn't matter what we say, they're going to do it anyway."

The Police Jury during its regular meeting last week approved the lake's drawdown beginning on Sept. 6 and end-

ing Jan. 15. Reducing the lake's water level involves progressively closing False River's water gates — located near La. 78 at La. 1/False River Road — to prevent additional water flow from feeding into the lake from adjoining tributaries.

This year, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and

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Fisheries has given the parish its blessing to lower the lake's water level by up to 6 feet. Parish and state officials say this year's drawdown probably will only reach a maximum of 5½ feet.

The lake's normal water level is around 16½ feet.

In 2014, the state and parish only instituted a 3½-foot drawdown of the lake from September of that year to March 2015. It was then extended an extra 45 days to help contractors building a 16½-acre containment dike in the lake's southern region, another restoration project geared toward revitalizing the waterway.

Brian Heiman, biology manager for District 7 in Wildlife and Fisheries' department of inland fisheries, says drawdowns help expose to the atmosphere the heavy build up of sediments that have settled over time on the bottom of the lake.

False River's decline over the past two decades has mostly been attributed to the heavy silt buildup at the bottom of the lake, which state officials say has impeded vegetation growth and curtailed fish-spawning habitats.

"The underwater decomposition process is not as rapid, so we're trying to accelerate that with the drawdown," Heiman said.

Reducing the water level by more than 3 feet this year will expose more of the lakebed to sunlight — especially on the northern and southern ends of the waterway where most fish spawning occurs, he said.

Drying out the sediments creates firmer foundations for game fish to spawn and create nests, Heiman said, and creates a better environment for vegetation to grow.

"We're not saying after drawdown this is going to be the best fishery in the state," Heiman said. "In my opinion, it's already good. We just want to make it better."

But given the damage property owners like Falgout say the last drawdown did to their bulkheads — which are man-

made barriers that prevent erosion of waterfront properties — not everyone was on board with the effort this year.

Juror Kyle Olinde, who also sits on the False River Watershed Council — the body of state and local government officials and parish leaders overseeing False River's restoration efforts — conceded there could be some damage to properties.

However, he noted that engineers discovered last time that most of the failures were due to poor construction.

"Bulkheads, or retaining walls, are designed to hold your land up," Olinde said. "The river is not there to keep your wall up. They're supposed to be designed to keep your wall up with or without water. My seawall was one of the first to break last time, and it was due to poor construction."

Falgout, whose bulkhead was also damaged during the last drawdown, disagrees, saying he refuses to trust the engineers' assessment of the damage since they were hired by the Police Jury.

"They're lying to the public," he said. "They're even lying about the improvement. It will take five to six years before we know if this is working."

Schnur agrees. "I don't see any improvement," she says. "The water turbidity is terrible."

But Olinde said the parish has seen aquatic growth and an influx of bait shrimp since the restoration efforts began several years ago. He has even gotten reports from local fishermen who claim they're catching more catfish and trophy bass.

"The Watershed Council has seen nothing but positive stuff," Olinde said. "Some people are just impatient and selfish."

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