

# Plan for False River rekindles enthusiasm for restoring lake

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**NEW ROADS** — Clouds of doubt looming over the state's revitalization efforts for False River in Pointe Coupee Parish seem to be clearing after Louisiana Department of Natural Resources officials last week unveiled an estimated \$2 million comprehensive restoration plan.

Parish officials say the DNR's 11-part plan rekindled the passion the more than 250 people who attended Wednesday's meeting have for the once trophy lake, which has been in decline since siltation drove down water quality starting about 30 years ago.

State and parish officials are encouraging area residents and other stakeholders to review the False River Ecosystem Restoration Project plan at <http://www.dnr.louisiana.gov>, submit feedback and further embrace it by contributing money to go toward its implementation.

"I saw nothing but positive support for the plan," Pointe Coupee Parish Administrator Jim Bello said Friday about the turnout at Wednesday's public meeting. "I just hope the public understands the timeframe around this thing all wraps around money."

And money, or a lack thereof, has been the primary concern that prompted state Rep. Major Thibaut to bring DNR officials to the table about False River.

Thibaut, D-New Roads, said Wednesday that he reached out to DNR and state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries officials to come up with this latest restoration proposal for the 22-mile oxbow lake after years of public disappointment.

Since 2001, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been trying to draft its own restoration plan for False River but it has been delayed by funding shortages that

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have left the corps study stalled in a state of limbo, Thibaut and others said Wednesday at the Scott Civic Center.

The DNR plan was presented as an alternative measure to reverse the lake's condition while the corps waits on funding to complete its study. Thibaut said Wednesday public input is needed to convince state lawmakers to allocate the funds for the plan to move forward.

The DNR plan is comprised of short-term, midterm and long-term goals, including six short-term steps that have an estimated total implementation cost of \$140,000. The plan's first goal is channeling and sediment basin maintenance, which DNR officials said the Pointe Coupee Parish Police Jury recently spent about \$23,000 to implement.

An additional \$10,000 will be needed to complete the routine cleaning of sediment traps and installation of more fencing along the lake's banks to reduce erosion and sediment runoff into False River, DNR officials said.

The most expensive short-term endeavor is the development and implementation of an artificial reef, spawning beds and vegetative projects to improve the lake's habitat at an estimated cost of 80,000.

Rounding out the plan's short-term actions are assessments of the lake's sedimentation and turbidity, sampling fish populations and stocking it with more desirable species; an annual special season for commercial fishing from November through February; and monitoring the lake's grass carp and determining aquatic planting strategies.

The proposal's most costly efforts are found in the midterm actions, which include four goals with a total estimated cost between \$1 million and \$1.6 million. The plan's midterm actions raised concerns and slight disappointment from some meeting attendees, officials said.

A majority of the midterm goals section's total estimated



Advocate staff photo by **ARTHUR D. LAUCK**

State and local officials released a plan last week to improve water quality and revitalize False River in Pointe Coupee Parish after years of problems with siltation and sediment.

costs falls under the proposal to create island, or terrace, habitats in the South Flats to improve fish and wildlife habitat, wave attenuation, water temperature cooling and overall water quality, DNR officials said.

About \$1 million is needed to dredge the lake sediments to create the terraces, DNR officials said, but that cost could increase by as much as \$600,000 if the department was not able to implement lake level management, or a lake drawdown.

DNR is proposing that False River's water level be lowered by 2 to 3 feet between mid-September and mid-January in 2014 to help naturally reduce buildup of muck on the lakebed. The False River Civic Association criticized a drawdown about a year ago when the corps proposed lowering the lake's water level by as much as 6 feet.

At the time, the association's members were afraid a drawdown would fracture shoreline bulkheads and the foundations of lakefront properties, but Patricia Schnur, president of the False River Civic Association, said the drawdown is the least of the group's concerns now.

"Overall, the proposal sounds great," Schnur said Friday. "There are some issues that will have to be addressed as they come up, like the shape and location of the islands they want to

build in the Flats, (but) that's so far down the road."

Schnur called the DNR's plan a "move in the right direction."

Ron Pourciau, president of the Twin River Anglers, a local chapter of the B.A.S.S. Federation, echoed Schnur's sentiments but added the fishermen present at Wednesday's meeting were hoping the lake drawdown would occur sooner than what was proposed.

"We have to support the science," Pourciau said. "We're just glad we have a plan we can possible move forward."

The only item under the plan's long-term goals is the development of a conservation and watershed management strategy that hinges largely on the creation of the False River Watershed Council, Thibaut said Wednesday.

Thibaut said the council would be comprised of members appointed by state and local officials. Its mission would be to produce recommendations related to the continued monitoring and revitalization efforts of False River.

Since the meeting, DNR Assistant Secretary Stephen Chustz said most of the feedback the agency has received from the public has been positive.

"A lot of folks have been wanting to know how they can contribute (money)," Chustz said. "Somebody at the meeting

said they wanted to write us a check that night. I think people are excited to see something is going to happen.

"They just don't want to rely on funding, they want to show the government they are serious about being a partner and getting it done," he said

Pointe Coupee Parish officials are working on setting up an account where the public can make contributions to the projects, Chustz said.

In the meantime, the plan's implementation relies heavily on the approval of several legislative measures Thibaut said will be coming up for a vote in the near future.

Thibaut said the various bills, if approved, could allocate approximately \$500,000 in immediate funds to get the project off and running later this year.

"We finally have something we never had before: an amendable plan," Bello said. "(But) we remain disappointed that the corps hasn't completed its study yet."

False River has been plagued with problems since the late 1980s and early 1990s when a series of man-made drainage canals caused a dramatic increase in sediment flow into the lake.

The sediment settled along the bottom of the lake where it smothered vegetation growth, reducing the spawning territory for fish, such as the trophy bass the lake once had in abundance.

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