

False River revitalization plan unveiled



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Advocate staff photo by HEATHER MCCLELLAND State Rep. Major Thibaut, D-New Roads, opens Wednesday night's heavily attended False River Ecosystem Status Update and Alternative Action meeting in the William Scott Civic Center in New Roads.

By Terry L. Jones

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NEW ROADS — The Louisiana Department of Natural Resources unveiled to the public Wednesday its comprehensive plan for the revitalization of False River to a room full of fishermen, community stakeholders and parish officials.

The 11-part plan outlined a set of goals that state Rep. Major Thibaut, D-New Roads, said he hoped the public would embrace, if only in part, to finally get moving toward restoring the lake to its condition before siltation drove down water quality starting about 30 years ago.

Thibaut said he called on the state Department of Natural Resources and the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to produce the plan presented to the public for

the first time Wednesday night at the Scott Civic Center in New Roads.

The proposal, titled False River Ecosystem Restoration Project, lists several short-term actions to upgrade the 22-mile-long oxbow lake.

They include channel and sediment basin maintenance, establishing a watershed drainage network, making habitat improvements and continuous evaluation and stocking of the lake's fish species.

According to the plan, nearly all of these short-term goals already are being implemented.

The plan lists mid-term goals such as conducting water quality surveys, drainage network hydromodification, creating an island/terrace habitat and making a 2- to 3-foot water level adjustment, or drawdown, which has been a controversial proposal in the past.

The plan's long-term goals focus on a watershed management plan that Thibaut told the crowd would require formation of the False River Watershed Council.

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.

"I think some sound advice should come out of it and we should be able to enact some of their recommendations," Thibaut said. "I think we need a lot of different ideas so that in the future, we're not faced with these problems again."

Stephen Chustz, assistant DNR secretary, said most of the proposed plan's implementation would depend heavily on funding.

Chustz told the crowd capital outlay measures in a current legislative bill could give the project about \$500,000 to get the plan in motion.

Additional funding may be available through future legislative appropriations, he suggested.

Chustz said a copy of the plan is now available on the DNR's website, <http://www.dnr.louisiana.gov>. The public is being asked to review it and follow instructions posted on the site to provide feedback and offer suggestions to the department, he said.

"We know everyone is tired of waiting around; they want to know how can (they) make things move?" Chustz said. But, he added, "We don't have all the answers."

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.

Since 2001, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been trying to draft a restoration plan of its own for False River, but that plan has been delayed by funding shortages that have left it stalled in a state of limbo, officials said Wednesday night.

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