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Where Water Is an Old Friend, Until It Turns Into a Nemesis

By KIM SEVERSON

BUTTE LA ROSE, La. — You do not really want to ask a Cajun why he lives in a swamp, especially when he is packing everything he owns because the very swamp he loves is about to swallow up his house.

The [Army Corps of Engineers](#) opened a portion of the Morganza Spillway on Saturday afternoon to relieve pressure on the [levees](#) from a bulging Mississippi River, and millions of cubic feet of water began rushing into the Atchafalaya Basin.

The corps expects to open more of the spillway in the coming days, allowing the water to rise steadily throughout the basin. In a day, maybe two, it will start to engulf this little river community in Cajun country.

Russell Melancon, 55, grew up pulling catfish, bass and crawfish from the Atchafalaya River and the swamp that surrounds it. He married here and is raising a son here.

And now, the place he loves is likely to drown. It could take a month or more for the water to seep back into the swamp behind the house he built with cypress boards and sweat.

Copperhead snakes might slither into the rafters. Alligators will take up residence on sheds. Gardens fat with tomatoes will be gone, and mosquitoes will swarm in such thick clouds that even he, a Cajun with skin as thick as one of those alligators, might not be able to stand it. So why live in a swamp that everyone knew was likely to flood one day?

As Mr. Melancon crated the belongings of three generations of family on Friday and got ready to pack his relatives into campers and cars, the answer was plain as the sticky Louisiana day.

“It’s where we was raised. Where my daddy was raised. Where we make our living,” he said. “Why you are here is something you never even think about. You are this place.”

In what is surely the nation’s slowest-moving natural disaster, the flooded Mississippi has been working its way south through cities and farmland, leaving people homeless and crops in ruins as it hits record levels.

It will end here in southern Louisiana, where the corps decided on Friday to open part of the levee system that holds back the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers. It was the only way, the engineers said, to take the pressure off the levees that protect New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

The move will divert that water into what is essentially the big bathtub that is the Atchafalaya Basin, a stretch of water and land 20 miles wide and 150 miles long and like nowhere else in the United States.

“You can’t have the Cajun culture without the basin,” said Oliver A. Houck, a professor at Tulane Law School who fought to preserve the basin when he was general counsel and vice president of the National Wildlife Federation.

To the north, the water is mostly saturating farmland, leaving it possibly richer in nutrients. But here in the southern half of the basin, home to descendants of the Acadians who settled in the 1700s and where countless Louisiana residents have passed their childhoods fishing and playing among its bayous and backwater lakes, several thousand people could lose everything.

“My husband still doesn’t believe it, but it’s really coming now,” said Deborah LeBlanc, 56, who lives next door to Mr. Melancon, her brother-in-law.

With the rest of the extended family, Ms. LeBlanc spent the weekend finishing up the details of moving their intertwined lives.

The outdoor dogs and Barbecue, the miniature horse, were sent to live with friends whose land is protected by the levee. The shed where Ms. LeBlanc’s father spends his days making catfish nets was dismantled. She even made her son take out her new air-conditioner.

“I asked God today if I’m coming back, and he said yes, so I guess I’ll believe that,” she said. “I can’t see living anywhere else.”

Unlike the Mississippi, which has been walled and manipulated by manufacturing and transportation and other byproducts of urban growth, the Atchafalaya has been allowed to run wild, lacing through the longest stretch of river swamp in the country.

Still, the effects of levees and nature have conspired to fill the river with silt and change the quality of the water. That, in turn, has suppressed the fish and wildlife that rely on it. But the basin is still vastly more ecologically productive than the Everglades, Mr. Houck said.

Unlike the Mississippi, the Atchafalaya River still makes land, Mr. Houck said. It drops its silt where the river meets the Gulf of Mexico — an essential contribution in a part of the country’s shoreline that is losing up to 29 square miles of land a year.

“And it’s very, very beautiful,” Mr. Houck said.

For the people who live here, the prospect of a flood was always hanging there, however remotely. The last time the Morganza was opened and flooded the basin was in 1973.

In practical terms, that put the water just at the edge of the porch at Doucet’s Grocery here. This time, it is supposed to be higher, possibly reaching the bait cooler.

But no one really knows. It is not like a straight shot of water will surge down a sluice box created by two levees.

Rather, the basin is shaped more like a sock. Most likely the water will wind down to the area around Morgan City, near its heel, and then loop back to further swell the swamps around this and other small communities. Compounding the problem is the Atchafalaya River itself, which winds in and out of the basin and is already so fat it is lapping onto lawns and starting to creep into the fish camps that serve as weekend retreats.

Guy Cormier, the president of St. Martin Parish, figures that about 3,000 people — a small percentage of those who live in the area, he said — will be affected.

He and others waiting for the floodwaters make a point of saying that the heart of Cajun country here will be just fine. Zydeco music will still spill from the cafes in nearby Breaux Bridge, and the last of the crawfish from this season will continue to be boiled in countless backyards.

The most optimistic here even see the influx of fresh, sweet river water as a good thing for the swamp, even though it is likely to hurt oyster beds and shrimping grounds along the gulf shore. The wild crawfish will come strong in future seasons. The fish will be more plentiful.

But not everyone agrees. Especially people packing their lives.

“It might be good for the fishing, but it’s going to tear us up,” Mr. Melancon said.

Still, he and his family will be back when the water is gone. They will assess the damage, shoo away the snakes and mosquitoes and unpack. It will take more than seven feet of water to get them out of the swamp.

“It snows up there in New York City, doesn’t it?” asked Mr. Melancon’s father-in-law, Floyd Harrington, 81. “How come all those people don’t move?”

Campbell Robertson contributed reporting from Morganza, La.



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