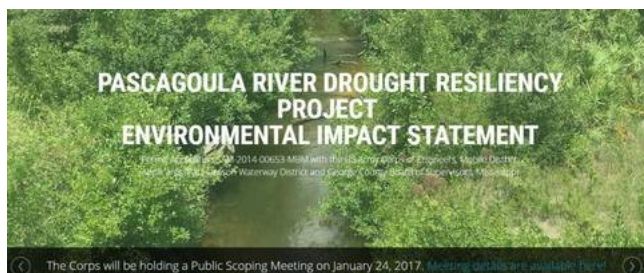


GEORGE COUNTY JANUARY 23, 2017 1:54 PM

Speak out about protecting the Pascagoula, environmentalists urge



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Tuesday evening in Lucedale, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will hold a scoping meeting on the Lake George project that proposes to dam tributaries to the free-flowing Pasagoula River. **Corps of Engineers**

BY KAREN NELSON
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PASCAGOULA — An “Action Alert” has gone out among Coast environmentalists urging people to attend a federal public meeting Tuesday night in Lucedale to discuss the proposed Lake George project.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is holding only one scoping meeting as they study the project. It will be at the Senior Center on Mississippi 198 in Lucedale from 5-8 p.m. Tuesday.

The project would dam two tributaries to the Pascagoula River and create twin lakes in George and Jackson Counties called Lake George.

The outcry has come because the Pascagoula River is one of the last — and certainly the largest — free-flowing rivers in the lower 48 states. Many believe the lakes will damage not only that designation but also 1,200 acres of wetlands and 41 miles of stream channels, as well as farms and forest land at the site of the twin lakes.

The Sierra Club and Gulf Restoration Network have both sent out a call to members.

The Corps will take comments and suggestions from the public, but there is no formal presentation.

“This is not a public forum for expressing your feelings on the project,” Moxey told the Sun Herald.

There are other ways for the public to tell the Corps what they think and what they believe needs to be studied. Anyone interested can send a comment to the Corps or email the project head, Michael Moxey, at michael.b.moxey@usace.army.mil.

In an interview Monday, Moxey said the agency has already received 4,000 comments on the project, which was proposed by rural George County and the Pat Harrison Waterway District as a way to guarantee the flow of the Pascagoula River during drought. The two entities say the lakes could be drained if industry downstream needs more water when rainfall is scarce, which it has been. They project droughts will get worse, according to the project proposal, made after a multi-year study by Pat Harrison and George County. The pair has already spent almost \$2 million in state bond money on the proposal.

Environmentalists, however, say the river is resilient naturally, the project will damage the natural flow of the streams and main river, and it is unnecessary and too expensive at a projected \$100 million. Pat Harrison and George County have said they would seek BP oil spill money, leftover Katrina money and offshore oil and gas revenue to build the lakes.

While drought alleviation is the stated reasoning, George County has long searched for a way to create a recreational lake to help its economy and add tourism to the mix.

Keep it civil

More than a year ago, when Jackson County hosted scoping meetings in Vancleave and Hurley, the sessions became heated.

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Video: Tempers flare at Lake George meeting in Hurley

Realtor Mark Cumbest defends family owning land in Lake George project area.

Karen Nelson - klnelson@sunherald.com

The Corps, on a website set up exclusively for this project, has set ground rules for Tuesday night:

- Be respectful of other’s views

- Wait your turn to speak to a Corps representative
- Only Corps approved meeting materials and displays allowed inside
- The public may not block the entrance or exits
- Do not disrupt the meeting in any way or you may be asked to leave or escorted out.

The Mississippi Chapter of the Sierra Club is proposing to “swamp” the meeting with supporters who oppose the project. In a flier, it said the Pascagoula is a national treasure that needs protecting and that “significant public and private dollars have been invested to protect the Pascagoula Basin and secure public access to areas such as the Upper and Lower Pascagoula Wildlife Management Areas.”

It points out that there is a growing and thriving eco-tourism industry that depends on the Pascagoula River remaining a free-flowing river.

In its comments, the Gulf Restoration Network has said, “There will be significant foreseeable impacts to the thermal refuge for striped bass identified at the mouth of Big Cedar Creek,” where it empties into the Pascagoula, something that was identified by research between 1997 and 1999 and published in 2000 in the Journal of the Mississippi Academy of Sciences.

Pat Harrison and George County also have a question and answer page on the project and have told Jackson County supervisors to expect a completion date of 2020. Jackson County initially supported the project but pulled out of the application process last year after ongoing urging by Coast voters.

Comments pouring in

The Corps’ Moxey said it’s a very complex project because of the size and scope and “all the different environmental and social aspects of it.”

He said, “The fact that we got 4,000 comments speaks volumes,” and is probably more important than the number of people who show up on Tuesday.

The Corps likely will take two to three years to complete the Environmental Impact Study, the federal permit evaluation process required by law.

“We regulate the impact to wetlands and streams,” he said. “If we don’t give them a permit, they can’t impact the wetlands.”

The options going forward will be to issue a permit as the project is proposed, issue one for a modified project or not issue one at all.

The idea that the two lakes would be an effective drought control is one aspect that will be studied and evaluated, he said.

The fact that \$2 million in state money has already been spent on the project has no impact on the Corps’ evaluation, he said.

He said, “this federal process is a stand alone process.”

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IF YOU GO

The Corps will hold an open house and public scoping meeting to allow the public to learn about the proposed project and submit comments.

- Where: George County Senior Center Building
- Location: 7102 Mississippi 198, near Old Highway 63 Road, Lucedale
- When: 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.

- Details: 601-947-2162

THE SUN HERALD WILL BE BROADCASTING LIVE VIA FACEBOOK AT 5:30 P.M.

TO MAKE EFFECTIVE COMMENTS

- Be brief so the point of your comment is not missed.
- Be as specific as possible in your comments.
- Focus your comments on specific topics, locations, or issues.
- Are there additional issues or alternatives the Corps should consider?

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