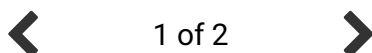


**JACKSON COUNTY**    OCTOBER 21, 2015 4:02 PM

# Coast groups attend senate panel hearing to support protecting the Pascagoula River



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JACKSON -- Jeff Wilkinson told a Coast group outside a state Senate committee meeting Wednesday, "It seems like every few years we have to fight something like this."

He was talking about a project that would dam a tributary just off the Pascagoula River in order to create 2,900 acres of lakes in George and Jackson counties.

"It ought to be the default is to protect the Pascagoula River," he said, "make it harder to do something like this."

Wilkinson, of Eco Tours of South Mississippi, had driven up from the Coast with others who have an interest in protecting the river, such as Alice Baker with Pascagoula Paradise Paddlers and Tom Singley from the former Save The Pascagoula group. Save the Pascagoula was deactivated several years ago, after two other recent threats to the river -- coal barging up the river and the Richton salt dome plan -- were thwarted.

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Sen. Brice Wiggins, R-Pascagoula, had called the information-gathering hearing to see if there is a need for two lakes that have a beginning cost estimate of \$80 million.

Some of those who made the three-hour drive were invited to speak. Some just felt being in the audience to show support for the river was enough.

The one-hour hearing was more like a grilling, when Wiggins asked Pat Harrison Waterway District's Hiram Boone if his environmental data was sound.

The Waterway District is proposing to dam Big and Little Cedar creeks two miles from the Pascagoula main trunk as a drought-control measure, so it can provide water to the river during low flow.

The benefit listed for the project is ensuring the river stays above state minimum levels for industry downstream.

"Would it surprise you that Chevron (Pascagoula Refinery) hasn't signed on to support this project?" Wiggins asked Boone.

Boone replied, "Nothing would surprise me anymore. When we first started, it was about maintaining the river for wildlife and industry."

He said the applicants -- the Waterway District, George County and Jackson County -- have been working on the project since 2009. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, now in the permit phase, is taking comments.

Boone said organizers were hoping to get RESTORE Act BP oil-spill money, Katrina-recovery money or Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act money to pay for it.

State Sen. Michael Watson, R-Pascagoula, asked Boone if he was certain this is an environmentally sound project and Boone said it was, based on studies they have. But the Pickering Firm, working on the environmental end of the proposal, told the panel "much, much more" data is needed.

Pickering's Curt Craig said, "We have enough information to say go on to the next step" but the project needs more geotechnical testing, flow monitoring and a great deal more soil borings and sampling.

A number of Coast legislators area on the Ports and Marine Resources committee and all of them had questions as well. Sen. Deborah Dawkins, D-Pass Christian, pointed out it isn't easy getting permits for a dam in Mississippi.

The Pascagoula River Audubon Center and Mississippi Audubon's conclusion: The reservoirs could affect the free-flowing river in the lower 48 states. The design presented as the largest me.

"These reservoirs would hold water that would be flooded by Audubon's Mark LaSalle told the panel. The river has proven it adapts during low-flow times. "Best let it be," LaSalle said.

Eric Richards, a Pascagoula engineer, said he was afraid the project would "do a lot of harm to a river we're supposed to be protecting." He's concerned the amount of evaporation on 2,900 acres of lake water and the loss of water via seepage into the ground will keep the creeks from contributing to the river system.

"I read the environmental assessment. It's all there," he said before the hearing. "It's just the opposite of what the applicants are trying to get across. They say it will increase the water flow. It would only do that one or two times every few years (if they release water from the lakes). Otherwise it decreases the flow."

Stan Flynt, a lobbyist from the Coast who told the panel he was there on his own time, said he hears this question being asked: "Why would any reasonable person put this national landmark at risk just so developers won't have to dig their own lakes?"

Outside the hearing, Flynt said, he's hearing the Waterway District is expected to use some of the BP money the state will receive to dam the creeks and build the lakes.

"I say if BP wants to buy itself a billion dollars' worth of bad press," Flynt said, "go ahead and whack this hornet's nest."

The Mississippi Chapter of the Sierra Club, the Gulf Restoration Network and the state Department of Marine Resources, which will have a say in the permitting process, were also at the meeting.



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