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STEPHEN CHUSTZ, assistant secretary of the state Department of Natural Resources' Office of Coastal Management

# False River to be lowered by 3 feet for 6 months



Advocate staff photos by HILARY SCHEINUK

Pierre Lemoine holds on to his son Jacques-Pierre Lemoine, 4, while the family dog Marley, a 5-year-old golden retriever-Lab mix, leaps from the dock after a stick on False River in New Roads on Sunday.

## Drawdown aimed at restoring New Roads lake's health

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After more than 20 years of talking about it — a discussion that has often polarized Pointe Coupee residents — state and local authorities are taking their biggest step yet in trying to restore False River by instituting a man-induced drawdown of the ailing oxbow lake.

State officials have given the Pointe Coupee Parish Police Jury the OK to reduce the lake's water level from 16.5 feet to approximately 13.5 feet for the next six months. That process was scheduled to start Tuesday, one day after the Labor Day holiday that traditionally marks the end of summer.

Residents with homes and businesses along the lake's 22-mile-long shoreline are buzzing with excitement about the effort to restore the lake, even though the drawdown is likely to have a negative impact on businesses for a time.

“Yeah, I'm going to lose a little business because its still warm, but it's going to be

a great outcome on the backside,” said Jim Major, who owns a local pub and eatery called Jim's Place at the north end of False River.

He said the drawdown will prevent boaters from accessing his business via the lake because the water near his business will be too shallow.

But Major doesn't care. He's far more concerned with returning False River to its former glory as a trophy lake for bass fishing. “I been fighting to see this happen since '09,” he said. “I'm pumped about it.”

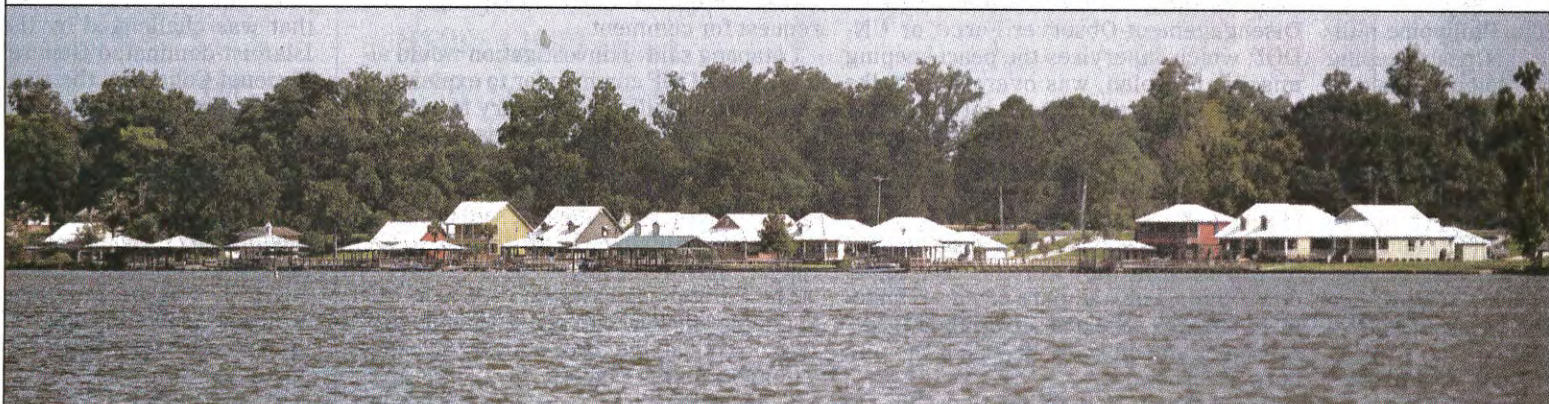
False River's decline over the past two decades has mostly been attributed to the heavy silt buildup at the bottom of the lake, which state officials have said impeded vegetation growth and curtailed fish-spawning habitats.

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries officials say the drawdown will have a multifaceted effect on improving False River's water quality. The most im-



ABOVE: The water level of False River sat around 16-16.5 feet over Labor Day weekend. BELOW: Camps and homes line the False River shoreline in New Roads on Sunday.

► See FALSE RIVER, page 5A





Kraig Strenge, of Lafayette, launches his boat at the public boat launch Sunday near Morel's Restaurant on False River in New Roads.

## FALSE RIVER

Continued from page 1A

portant outcome is that lower water levels promote growth of key vegetation that stifles the buildup of thick sediment along the lake bed.

Parish officials urged property owners over the past two weeks to take any necessary precautions to protect their boat docks and watercraft while the drawdown is in effect.

At least three of the lake's public boat launches will be shut down for the duration of the drawdown because some areas of the lake will be too shallow for recreational boat use, parish officials have said.

The lake will maintain the lower water level until March 1, when the parish has been mandated to close False River's water gates — located near La. 78 at La. 1/False River Road — to allow the lake to return to its normal level.

While drawing down the water level is considered an important measure, it's only one

step in restoring False River to its former glory, according to state officials.

"Overall, the drawdown will have a very minimal effect on our overall efforts with the restoration project," said Mike Wood, director of inland fisheries for the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

But, he said, drying up some of the shallow areas in the lake will firm up spawning areas for fish to use later.

The thought of lowering False River's water level was once a vexing issue for some homeowners.

Members of the False River Civic Association were critical of a drawdown when a proposal was presented to lower the lake's water level by as much as 6 feet several years ago.

The association's members were afraid a drawdown of that magnitude would fracture shoreline bulkheads and the foundations of lakefront properties.

Patricia Schnur, president of the False River Civic Association, said the group doesn't

have the same fears with the current drawdown since it matches the "natural" reduction of the lake's water level during a drought in 2000.

"It is reasonable to assume that no 'new damages' will occur with this limitation and we are therefore not opposing it," Schnur said in an email last week. "However, this is not a certainty or guarantee. Property owners would be well advised to watch out for any changes to seawalls and concrete slabs and to document them if they should become evident."

Schnur said the association is also more keen on this drawdown effort because it will serve as a cost-cutting measure on another restoration project aimed at addressing the lake's siltation issues.

That project is the construction of a 16.5-acre containment dike in the south end of False River.

That project, being financed by \$1.5 million in state funding, is set to kick off sometime this month.



LEFT: A group of teenagers enjoy the Labor Day weekend by being pulled on a tube behind a boat on False River.

BELOW: From left, Austin Broussard, 19; Isabelle Smith, 13; Morgan Broussard, 13; and Kathy Broussard, of Lafayette, ride jet skis on False River on Sunday.



The first phase involves dredging the sediment buildup on the lake's floor and using it to build a containment dike that will act as a dam to block further sediment buildup in the rest of the waterway.

"Although much work has been going on behind the scenes to improve conditions, this will be a very visible sign that actions are being taken to improve this great natural resource," said Stephen Chustz, assistant secretary of the state's Department of Natural Resources' Office of Coastal Management.

"The work that is being done will lead to improved fisheries and water quality and will further complement the previously completed spawning beds, fish stockings and commercial fishing season, which are all part of the multifaceted plan to restore the lake," Chustz wrote in an email.

Officials said previously that the dike will take approximately seven months to finish.

In the meantime, Chustz said, property owners should take

advantage of the opportunity while the water level is low to do any maintenance or clean-up work that may be needed around their piers.

Major Morel, whose family owns the lakeside eatery Morel's Restaurant in New Roads, said he has every intention of doing exactly that.

"I want to make sure all our

pilings are good and everything is stable," Morel said. "With the lower water level, you can see things you normally wouldn't see. If they would have stuck with a six-foot drawdown, I could have done a bunch of work under my building."

Follow Terry Jones on Twitter, @tjonesreporter.