

Federal funding to promote Caddo Lake tourism approved

Congress: \$400,000 set aside for science center

By MIKE ELSWICK

2004, Marshall News-Messenger

Nature tourism on Caddo Lake got a \$400,000 boost this week as the U.S. Senate approved that amount for funding the Caddo Lake Ramsar Wetland Science Center, according to Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison.

Her request for the additional funding doubles the federal funds appropriated for the center in the last fiscal year, she said.

"I am pleased Congress has agreed to provide resources to preserve this valuable wetland," said Ms. Hutchison, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. "These funds will allow the center to enhance its wetlands protection and improve education programs for visitors."

Caddo is Texas' only natural lake and was designated as a "wetland of international importance" in 1993 and 1996 under the worldwide Ramsar Convention, Ms. Hutchison said. Only 17 wetlands in the U.S. have received this distinction.

Ms. Hutchison's request was included in the Interior Appropriations bill for fiscal year 2004. The bill now goes to the president to be signed into law.

Caddo Lake Institute Executive Director Dwight Shellman said the money will be used to fund a science and visitor center.

"This is the base funding for this center. We've been working on this since 1996, and our Texas delegation (to Congress) has been very understanding," Shellman said. He said Ms. Hutchison has been instrumental in getting the funding request through Congress.

Shellman said the institute will be raising money separately for renovation of structures at the former Longhorn Army Ammunition Plant on the lake's shore. A former administration building and computer building will serve as the first science and visitor center, according to plans, he said.

The mission of the Caddo Lake Institute, founded by musician and Linden native Don Henley, is focused on the designation and its mission to educate the public and stimulate scientific inquiry into the unique environment.

"This has been years in the making," Shellman said, describing the public center the institute hopes to build and educational excursions it hopes to fund.

"This promises to be a real economic development boon for the area and for low impact ecotourism," Shellman said. "That (center) will become a regional center that will serve as a science and visitors center for local and visitor ecotourism."

Shellman said one of the next steps will be in establishing an East Texas birding trail focusing on locations in Uncertain, on Caddo Lake and at Caddo Lake State Park where those interested in spotting birds can go.

"This has really been a boost on the Texas Gulf Coast and can be here to," he said.