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Changes To Levee Board Process Opposed By Environmental Groups

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http://media4-publicbroadcasting.net/wwno/files/201403/wetlands_canals_web.jpg
Wetlands south of New Orleans. The straight lines are where canals have been cut into the marshes, facilitating their degradation.

Credit Jason Saul / WWNO

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Environmental groups say politics, not safety, is priority in changes to levee board process.

A coalition of environmental groups is heading to Baton Rouge to fight legislation aimed at changing how levee board members are appointed. The changes would affect the levee board that is suing the oil industry to pay for repairing wetlands damaged over decades of oil production.

The coalition of about two dozen environmental groups is calling itself the Green Army. One of its first actions is aimed at stopping a bill proposed by Republican state senator Robert Adley of Benton.

Adley's bill would raise the requirements for people needing the nominating committee's approval to serve on the levee board. It would also allow the governor to reject all three nominees the bill would require.

It's aimed at two boards: the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority—East and —West.

The East levee panel is suing 97 oil, gas and pipeline companies to force repairs of the wetlands affected by production.

Steve Murchie of the Gulf Restoration Network says the change would bring more

politics than qualifications into the process.

“It appears to be an effort to set the nominating committee up to fail, which then gives the governor the authority to choose their nominees,” Murchie said.

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal is adamantly opposed to the levee board’s lawsuit, saying it wasn’t filed with his permission and runs counter to the state master plan for coastal restoration.

Sandy Rosenthal of Levees.org says the process as reformed by voters after Hurricane Katrina would be undermined by Adley’s bill. She said it’s extremely difficult as it stands to find qualified nominees willing to undergo a full financial disclosure, as well as serve without pay.

“It seems to me — very simple to me — that this legislation is not about safety for our residents," said Rosenthal. "It’s about something, an agenda, that is quite different.”

The new legislative session begins March 10.

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