An expanded interest in crawfish farming could mean at least a 10 percent increase in acreage for the coming season.

"We've had big turnouts at our pre-season meetings, especially in the rice growing areas," says aquaculture specialist Larry de la Bretonne of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. "We're looking for at least 125,000 acres being farmed this season."

"Some of the interest is tied to the price of rice and other agricultural commodities, but there's also the realization that crawfish can easily be meshed in with other farm enterprises and bring extra income without a big outlay of capital to get into the business," de la Bretonne adds.

Traditionally, the pond season begins with flooding of fields from Oct. 1 to Oct. 15, generally when daytime temperatures get into the low 80s and nighttime temperatures in the low 60s. Cooler temperatures mean fewer problems with oxygen in pond waters.

"Crawfish aquaculture is going to be a very important crop to the rice people in north and south Louisiana, because it will give them the opportunity to make, in many cases, more money per acre off crawfish than off the rice," the Extension aquaculturist continues.

De la Bretonne says rice farmers already have the three essential ingredients for growing crawfish: flat leveed land, a plentiful water supply and rice stubble as a basic food source.

"With good management, they are able to produce well over 1,000 pounds of crawfish to the acre," he says.

The name of the game in any agricultural endeavor, says de la Bretonne, is to get costs of production down. He notes that 60 percent of the money it costs a farmer to produce a crop is tied up in the labor-intensive activity of trapping.

Researchers with the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station are studying new trapping methods aimed at reducing costs in time and other activities related to working the ponds. One area of investigation is the movement of crawfish by water flow into traps which do not need to be baited. There also is work being done to improve baits and baiting methods.

"Overall, the market looks good for crawfish," says de la Bretonne. "The Cajun food craze still is a hot item and through marketing work by the Ag Center and other groups in the state, there's a growing acceptance of crawfish everywhere," de la Bretonne says.

He adds that the growing trend in the U.S. toward prepared foods and more dining out means many customers now and in the future will be less inclined to do their own crawfish peeling. Predictably, consumers in other states find the crawfish a mystery to peel. Therefore, much of the future of the industry will be tied to processed tail meat.

Because of the freezing quality of the washed tail meat, more restaurants in the state are featuring crawfish on the menu year round, says de la Bretonne. Frozen tail meat also has wide appeal out of state, where buyers can obtain a consistent, quality product 12 months of the year.