900 commercial fishermen on strike over low crawfish prices

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PIERRE PART — Tired of being trapped by what they say are low prices from wholesalers, a large number of commercial fishermen are participating in a crawfish “fish-out” in the Atchafalaya Basin area in hopes of making the buyers feel the pinch from a lack of supply for consumers.

Anxiety by a decrease from 25 cents to 25 cents per pound for crawfish which was levied by most processors or wholesalers the day after Easter members of the Louisiana Crawfish Producers Association decided to stage the fish-out, which began Thursday.

John Roe Sr. of Morgan City, LLC vice president and spokesman for the commercial fishermen in the Morgan City, Belle River and Part areas had joined in the protest by increasing the price of crawfish from the area Friday.

Roe said, and he was to meet with “fishermen” from that area Friday night.

The ban on crawfish, Roe said, will continue until processors and wholesalers have the current price of 75 cents a pound in crawfish. “To no less than 25 cents a pound,” Roe added that the increased price of 20 cents a pound was bound by wholesalers.

“We decided we cannot fish for less than 25 cents per pound, and that’s the bottom price for us to make a couple dollars, and feed our family,” Roe said.

“Where are the few fishermen going in the ban on crawfish, he said, and he was to meet with “fishermen” from that area Friday night.

He said the crawfish will be available for local use, but that’s a slow down too. We’re waiting to see how the industry does and get the increase, but I think we’ll get it,” Roe said.

Roe and Larry de la Batuz, an agriculture specialist with the LSU Agriculture Extension Service, said that the wholesale dealers traditionally have got the price of crawfish to fishermen during the week following Easter. The decrease, Roe said, is attributed to the end of the Catholic observance of Lent and fasting on fish days after Holy Week.

Roe added that late April generally marks the peak of the crawfish season, and a glut of the popular crustacean usually causes a decrease in prices for fishermen. However, he stressed that the basin area is not enjoying an abundance of crawfish this season.

Crawfish farmers shot down early this year because of a combination of low prices and inferior-quality crawfish and poor weather. The basin, which is experiencing a lot of problems this year, in the Hayne Pignons and Bayou Sarre area, nothing and nothing and the crawfish are having to go deeper and deeper into the basin to catch something. On the west side of the lake, in the Atchafalaya and Catahoula areas.

See CRAWFISH 5B.
they're having the same problem. “With a scarcity of crawfish on the market, the processors did the wrong thing in lowering the price to us just because it was the week after Easter. What's really ticked us off is they lowered our price but didn't pass it on to the consumers. We're tired of being kept poor by unscrupulous dealers, and we're going to continue this fish-out — we're not calling it a strike — until our price is raised to at least 35 cents per pound.”

Roe said that some fishermen in the association, which began a year ago and currently is experiencing a “boom” in membership, have reported being threatened by crawfish buyers, and added that he, too, has received personal threats. “I've had some fishermen coming to me saying that buyers have told them to either get back to fishing or they won't be able to sell their crawfish in the future,” Roe said. “I've had some personal threats, too. But we're going to continue until we get that price increased, no matter what.”

Roe said the current 25 cents per pound being paid for crawfish eliminates any profit to fishermen, particularly small-market fishermen. He added that the price “is the same as the top price we got 20 years ago.” With the costs for bait, traps, boats and motors, paid help and time taken into consideration, he said, the payment of 25 cents per pound “means we don't make anything at all.”

The price increase could take place for the fisherman, according to de la Bretonne, because crawfish buyers could be put under pressure to fill orders and meet the public demand for the commodity. But processors, those buying crawfish “from other middlemen” and processing the tail meat, also are caught in a financial bind, de la Bretonne said.

“A processor can't afford to buy at 50 cents a pound and the next day it's 40 cents,” he said. “In defense of the processor, they have a major market to sell meat Thursday through Saturday. Monday through Wednesday they peel crawfish and process the meat. This year the processors are trying to compete, and the price is ridiculously low, and the processors are losing their heads on the tail meat. It takes about seven pounds of crawfish to get one pound of tail meat, and that means about 100 pounds of crawfish for just 15 pounds of meat. So, that means the processors are caught in the middle, too, just like the fishermen.”

Crawfish farmers, who generally harvest crawfish between November and on into June if prices are good, also “took it on the chin,” de la Bretonne said. The Louisiana farmers, who have large amounts of money and equipment invested in more than 100,000 acres of crawfish ponds, suffered from lower prices because of the past two to three years of “the largest crawfish production seasons in history,” he said.

Generally the rotating seasons between crawfish farmers and fishermen complement each other, de la Bretonne said, but this year has proven to be an exception to the rule because of the anticipated good season and resulting low prices.

The LSU specialist described the maturing crawfish industry as “in the middle of being too big and not big enough.” Because production in the basin can fluctuate from year to year, and cannot be predicted, and with farmers being affected by anticipated high yields and not being large enough to handle the demand, the instability of the crawfish market “makes local people take crawfish for granted and almost eliminates any formation of a market out of state.”

Louisiana may produce up to 75 million pounds of crawfish one year and only 50 million pounds the next year, he said, “which would make it hard to set up a stable market outside of the state.”

Also, he said that, because crawfish now are available as early as November, and are still available into July, “they're not the delicacy in south Louisiana that they once were.”

The current ban on crawfish in the basin reflects the unrest caused by unstable prices and a fluctuating market, de la Bretonne said. “We're at the beginning of a national product,” he said, “and the basin is what hurts because we don't know what it will produce from year to year.”

Louisiana has the largest crustacean-harvesting industry in the world, he said, and “the crawfish market is the best-kept secret we've had.” He said there needs to be more of an effort to market locally than to “wait for orders to come in,” and that perhaps the farmers and fishermen should “make more of an effort to sell their own product.”

With the ban on crawfish fishing “catching on real quick,” Roe said, he believes crawfish farmers and fishermen are beginning to see “it pays to work together.”

“The average fisherman is paying a lot of attention to what's happening right now,” Roe said. “A lot of these people depend on four or five months of fishing to provide them with an income for an entire year, and they can't keep doing it for nothing. We're tired of the wholesalers and processors making all the money.”

Roe said his association also is discussing the possibility of crawfish farmers and fishermen establishing a market strictly for the sale of crawfish, and creating more competition “with us involved” for the existing buying companies. He added that the establishment of out-of-state markets is another “definite idea” being discussed. But for now, Roe and other fishermen are determined to continue their ban on fishing until their demand for 35 cents per pound is met. The ban will not adversely affect the crawfish in the basin, he said, but will “put some pressure on the buyers to pay us a decent price.”

“I will never fish another crawfish again the rest of my life for less than 35 cents a pound,” Roe insisted, “and many, many, many of our members feel exactly the same way. We're just wanting a fair price and one that's the lowest we can go to see any small profit, if any at all.”