Alligator farmers can cut releases, group argues

By MIKE DUNNE
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A task force is recommending to the Wildlife and Fisheries Commission and the Legislature that alligator farmers be allowed to release fewer of the reptiles into the wild as their numbers continue to grow.

Farmers are required to help beef up wild alligator stocks to ensure the reptiles remain a sustainable resource for meat and hides and because of the benefit the reptiles provide to the marsh habitat.

Alligators were placed on the Endangered Species List in 1973. But now, wildlife officials estimate there are about 2.1 million alligators in Louisiana alone.

By the mid-1980s, populations had rebounded significantly and egg collecting was allowed in 1986. In the past five years, about 27,000 hides have been harvested from the wild. Hundreds of thousands more alligators are raised on farms. They are hatched from eggs harvested in the wild because of difficulties getting fertile eggs in captivity and because the hatch rate goes up in a protected farm setting.

Some see an overpopulation in the wild but, "Nobody knows if we have reached carrying capacity," said Wildlife and Fisheries alligator specialist Ruth McElsoy.

Alligator farmers are required to release into the wild a number of 4-foot alligators equivalent to 17 percent of the number of fertile eggs they collected. It takes about two years for an alligator to grow to 4 feet. The return rate was based on research that shows 17 percent of hatchlings in the wild will grow to 4 feet.

Alligator farmers wanted to reduce the return rate to 12 percent. But Wildlife and Fisheries biologists recommended dropping the requirement to 12 percent.

Because wildlife officials estimate about 2.1 million alligators live in Louisiana, a task force is recommending to the Wildlife and Fisheries Commission and the Legislature that farmers be allowed to release fewer reptiles into the wild.
After some debate, the Alligator Task Force created by the Legislature recommended a return rate of 14 percent.

They had returned 34,000 alligators a year, he said. The department itself more or less admitted stocks were sufficient when it increased the alligator hunt this year from about 25,000 animals to 34,000 animals.

Farmers are unhappy with the existing $360,000 annual marketing program, which Bowman said was "generic" and aimed at convincing the public that alligators can be harvested in a sustainable manner.

"Wildlife and Fisheries biologist Noel Kinler told the task force that, "We need to be very cautious in making a reduction" and that overpopulation problems were regional.

"You can't count wildlife in dollars and cents. We need to be sure we know what we're dealing with," he said.

Wildlife and Fisheries biologist Noel Kinler told the task force that, "We need to be very cautious in making a reduction" and that overpopulation problems were regional.

Increasing the return rate could even be justified, he said.

"An error should be made in favor of the resource," Kinler said.

In addition to recommending the reduction in the return rate for alligator farmers, the Alligator Task Force also has recommended:

- Keeping the price of tags for skins at $4 a foot for wild and farm alligators.
- Creation of a marketing subcommittee made up equally of landowners, farmers and hunters.
- Farmers are unhappy with the existing $360,000 annual marketing program, which Bowman said was "generic" and aimed at convincing the public that alligators can be harvested in a sustainable manner.

"Too many people think "if you buy a handbag, you're wrong," said farmer's representative Ted Joanen.

Farmers, who harvest more alligators than do hunters, pay more into the fund and are looking for a more effective approach to expanding their market, said Wayne Sagrera, another farmer representative.