Alligator Meat Marketing Viewing

CAMERON, La. (AP) — If a team of marine specialists can find a way to get alligator meat to market, trappers in coastal marshes could double their income, the specialists say.

Those in the know consider alligator meat — particularly the tail — a delicacy, somewhere between chicken and tuna fish in taste and texture.

Mike Moody and Paul Creel, both of the Louisiana State University Cooperative Extension Service, brought several alligators to the LSU campus for study, hoping to find ways to improve income from these Southwest Louisiana marshes.

The animals were weighted and measured before dressing, then various segments of each were isolated to determine how much meat was available.

They are also looking into such things as consumer interest, the texture of various cuts, and wholesomeness of the meat.

They checked not only the tail, but cuts from the legs, back, ribs and jaw muscles.

LSU food scientists are also studying the meat for bacteria and other things that might pose a health problem, Moody said.

The alligators taken by trappers are generally skinned out in the marshes, because it isn't economical to lug a number of 8-foot carcasses back to a central point for skinning. Such handling would not meet strict federal standards on meat sold for human consumption.

Moody said that should markets be developed for the meat, it would be controlled by the standards governing all seafood sold in the state.

Meat from a 10-foot alligator dressing out at a minimum of 150 pounds would equal in value the market price of the skin, even if the meat sold at $1 a pound, he said. Alligator meat brings from $4 to $6 a pound in a specialized Florida restaurant trade.

Some fast-food chains in South Louisiana discovered alligator meat last year, selling gator meat for $4 a portion — about $16 a pound.

Louisiana was the first state in the nation to ban hunting of alligators, a move taken in the 1950s when the marsh population had declined drastically.

By 1967, the alligator population was back to about 100,000, and there were about 300,000 when Congress passed the endangered species act and Louisiana got permission for limited trapping under controlled conditions.

Currently, there are at least 500,000 alligators in the marshes of Southwest Louisiana, officials estimate.