Alligator season opens tomorrow

NEW ORLEANS (AP) -- The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission has set Sept. 4 for the opening of a one-month alligator hunting season in 12 parishes now home for at least 300,000 gators.

Alan Ensminger, chief of the commission's refuge division, said Tuesday a recent survey indicated more than 300,000 alligators living in the parishes open to the hunt, and as many as 150,000 more in wildlife refuge areas closed to the hunt.

He said he expects the federal ban prohibiting the interstate sale of alligator meat to be lifted by the middle of the season. The U.S. solicitor general is now reviewing the ban.

Ensminger predicted a lucrative market for alligators once the federal prohibition on the sale of meat is removed.

"The meat, the hides, even the teeth--which make very pretty jewelry--all could be utilized for a maximum profit," he said.

Louisiana opened the same 12 parishes to alligator hunting in 1979, and some 18,000 were killed.

The gator was protected as an endangered species in the 1960s, but as its population swelled in Louisiana marshlands, brief hunts in the marshes were resumed in 1972.

A hunt planned in 1978 was canceled because trappers could find no markets for their hides.

Last year's hunt was the first after international trade prohibitions on their hides were lifted, allowing Louisiana gator hides to be shipped to European tanners.

Hides sold for around $15 a foot during the 1979 hunt.

The alligators taken by trappers are generally skinned out in the marshes because it isn't economical to lug a number of 8-foot carcases back to a central point for skinning.

If meat sales become legal throughout the states, trappers would find a new source of income.

Specialists say alligator meat, especially the tail, is a delicacy, somewhere between chicken and tuna fish in taste and texture.

The 12 parishes where the gator hunt is scheduled Sept. 4 to Oct. 4 include Calcasieu, Cameron, Iberia, Jefferson, Lafourche, Plaquemines, Terrebonne, Vermilion, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. Mary and St. Tammany.