BAYOU PIGEON — Many crawfishermen who work the Atchafalaya Basin are on strike demanding more money for their catch, but Baton Rouge seafood retailers said they have yet to see a drop in supply.

The strike by a group of crawfishermen that began in the Pierre Part area Tuesday spread to Bayou Pigeon on Wednesday. Strikers said the 20 cents a pound they get from wholesalers now is too low and they demand at least 30 cents.

"You can't make it when a bait's 22 cents (a pound) and you're only getting 20 cents," said striker Charles Temple.

"I'm sure before they shut down, they (wholesalers) will give them more money," said Pete Pitre, owner of Pitre's Seafood on Foster Lane. "It's kinda hard to say what's going to happen to the supply."

"So far we haven't had any problem with supply," said Bill Pizzolato of Tony's Seafood on Plank Road.

Pizzolato said he expects to be able to keep buying larger, higher-quality crawfish he said his customers prefer. "The guy that's got good crawfish is not going to strike."

"This strike is going to help us," said buyer Ricky Phillips. "The price might go up over two to three days — if they don't fish."

Harold Kelley, left, and his son, Scott, right, talk to Mitch Collier at Bayou Pigeon on Wednesday, the second day of a strike by area crawfishermen. Collier fished Wednesday, but said he would join the strikers today.
Henry Berthelot, right, mans the scale at his seafood processing plant in Bayou Pigeon as Donald Hebert loads another sack.

**Strike**

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Pitre said he sympathized with the strikers—"They've got to have money"—and expected buyers to begin paying a nickel more a pound soon. Even if the wholesale price goes up, Pitre's retail price of 49 cents per pound for live crawfish will not. "I'm going to hold my price," he said. "I didn't drop my price when it went down."

On a day when they would rather be fishing, about 100 strikers gathered Wednesday afternoon at a popular boat ramp on the basin side of Bayou Pigeon. They tried to dissuade fellow crawfishermen from heading into the basin.

Two Iberville Parish sheriff's deputies parked their patrol cars at the boat ramp to deter any trouble. They had little more to do than keep people from blocking traffic and parked trucks.

The men did not man a typical picket line. They chatted in small groups and periodically talked to the few fishermen returning with sacks of crawfish. Chief Criminal Deputy Brent Allain said no fights or vandalism were reported at the ramp.

"It looks pretty good," said Charlie Davis, president of Common Claws, a crawfishermen's group helping organize the strike. "We just ask 'em not to go out until we get 50 cents."

"Some went today, some didn't know about the strike and some are going to go no matter what," said strike organizer Kerry Rodriguez, of Common Claws, who estimated at least three quarters of the several hundred men who fish the Bayou Pigeon area stayed out of the water Wednesday. "Ninety percent stayed home at Belle River," he said.

"I'm catching more crawfish and making less money" compared to last year when crawfishermen got 50 cents a pound, Rodriguez said.

The strikers may already be achieving their desired result. One fisherman told Rodriguez Wednesday afternoon that his buyer offered him 30 cents and asked if going out would be violating the strike.


Rodriguez said strikers take their loose picket efforts Thursday to other popular ramps in Morgan City or Ramah. The strikers' persuasion is peaceful, Rodriguez said. "We're not violent," he said. "We're not going to mess with anybody's stuff."

One Bayou Pigeon buyer said business was good Wednesday, but he feared for the near future. "Today's good, but tomorrow or the day after's going to be dead," said Henry Berthelot.

The strikers will scare off crawfishermen, Berthelot said. "They're scared to leave their trucks and trailers at the landing—afraid they'll come back to flat tires."

According to Berthelot and other wholesalers and retailers, the root of the problem lies with this year's bumper crop of crawfish in the Atchafalaya Basin.

The fish kill caused by Hurricane Andrew killed off most of the crawfish's natural enemies and the lack of predators created a population explosion of small crawfish.

"They're small, they look like peanuts," Pizzolato said. Customers don't like small crawfish.

"We're getting too much of the small crawfish," said Phillips, a Bayou Pigeon wholesaler and former crawfisherman. "I can only sell so much of that little junk."