Seafood

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something you could be doing.

The seasonal nature of the industry
now employs 4,000 to 6,000 people.
In the optimistic opinion of Mike
Marino, our Motivatitl Seafoods of
Houma, "If we processed all the seafood
we caught in Louisiana, we could completely
wipe out the state's unemployment
problem.

Merrill said, "It's becoming an old wives'
tale, that we can do away with all of our
state's problems, that's putting the cart
everyout of state processors.

"The one thing our fishermen
have always done well is provide
product on demand."

Merrill said, "And up until 10 years ago,
that was the right way to operate."

Another factor that has come
back to haunt Louisiana is the
traditional mom-and-pop nature
of its processing plants, said John
Sugan, extension service fisheries
agent in St. Tammany Parish.
Maj and Pop usually lack
the capital, and sometimes the
inclination to upgrade."

"When you have small, independent
operators, it tends to result in
icky," Sugan said.

The numbers bear him out.
From 1980 to 1984, Louisiana
accounted for 23 percent of the
processed seafood coming out of
the Gulf States. From 1981 to
1985, Louisiana processed only 20 percent. When seafood got
hot, Louisiana got left in the cold.

Now the state is playing catch-
up. And despite the size of its
productivity, many in the Louisiana
seafood industry are optimistic.

"We've got to do the things that
we do best," said Ken Roberts,
the Louisiana Cooperative
Extension Service economist.
"We're good at processing things in
Louisiana," Voisin said.
"Other states have been doing it
longer than we have, but we're closing
fast. We're starting to see some
long-term investment. It's an
industry that's growing.

Merrill also said, "It's becoming an old
wives' tale, that we can do away with all of our
state's problems, that's putting the cart before
the horse.

For starters, many traditional Gulf
species -- such as shrimp, crab
and oysters -- are being
fished at or near their maximum
potential. Others -- such as red
fish and speckled trout -- have
been overfished.

That means a Louisiana processor
or processor may go to all lengths
to find an established Florida
processor for a supply of seafood. If
it can't find one in Louisiana, it
wants to get the best processor to
expand his business.

"Every shrimp we catch is
being processed somewhere," said
Jerald Horst, extension service
agent for Jefferson Parish. "So if
we can't get to a shrimp processor,
we have to put an out-of-state plant in business."

That's not easy to do.

In the seafood industry, Horst
said, considerable value is placed
on loyalty between buyer and
seller. Sometimes not even higher
prices will lure a wholesaler from
the processor he's supplied for
years.

"Say you're a dockside dealer," Horst
said. "Why sell your seafood
to a processor with no track record
just because he's from
Louisiana? Why cut out some
body whose daddy bought
seafood from your daddy?"

There are other roadblocks
to the way to prosperity for Louisi-
an's seafood processors, indus-
ty experts said.

"The national seafood boom is
slowly. While consumption con-
tinues to increase, the pace has
tailed off from the go-go years of
the early 1980s."

"Nobody wants a seafood plant
in his back yard. Many investors
see coastal regions as more suited
to upscale waterfront development
tourism than canning factories."

"Even with Louisiana's high
unemployment, finding workers for
low-paying jobs as crab pickers
and oyster shuckers isn't easy."

Louisiana has a lingering
taste for a "banana republic"
problem such as poor quality
control at some processing plants
that have hurt the entire industry."

Maybe most importantly, Louisi-
an's overall economic troubles
make the development of any
industry difficult. State programs
to help seafood processors are
extremely limited.

"The state, for all its talk about
seafood, has absolutely nothing
to offer the processor," said
seafood processor Zachary
Casey. "Let's face it, Louisiana is
broke."

But all is not gloom and doom. In
many ways, the collapse of
Louisiana's economy has helped the
development of the seafood
industry.

"To begin with, the oil bust has
pointed out the benefits of a
diversified economy. As a result,
seafood is getting more attention
ever."

"But there are some processors who
clocked to the oil industry are
now looking for other places
to put their money. They are
filtering into seafood processing."

"Banks are also getting in on
the act, in some cases assigning
loan officers to the industry
exclusively on seafood ventures."

"Banks are more receptive,"
Casey said. "It's no longer a busi-
ness that nobody's even looking
more about the business of
seafood."

There are other bright spots.
More Gulf species are being
harvested, especially crabs
and shrimp, which are
creating a market for
both a "banana republic"
problem such as poor quality
control at some processing plants
that have hurt the entire industry."

"We've got a lot of things going
for us," he said. "We have good
government support. We're
getting the support of local
lawmakers."