Breaux: Divert water to save crawfish crop

NEW ORLEANS (AP) - Louisiana's wild crawfish crop might be saved by letting more Mississippi River water than usual pour into the Atchafalaya River, U.S. Sen. John Breaux said Thursday.

It may be too late for this year's crop - but, even if it is, the diversions would let crawfish bounce back faster from the past year's drought, said Greg Lutz, an aquaculture expert with LSU.

He said it would be well worth the effort, even if it just gives a small percentage of this year's crawfish a chance to provide next year's harvest.

"Otherwise, it may take several years for the populations to rebound from the effects of this drought," he said.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Old River Control Structure ensures that only a small part of the Mississippi River's water flows down the Atchafalaya. The huge weir keeps the Mississippi from changing its course into the Atchafalaya, which flows across lower ground.

Under federal law, only 30 percent of the Mississippi's water may flow down the Atchafalaya. However, the corps can change the percentage under certain circumstances. It did so in April 1996 to help the crawfish harvest.

Breaux said Gov. Mike Foster should ask the Corps to divert a limited amount of fresh water into the Atchafalaya.

"Louisiana's crawfish industry is in immediate need of help," he said.

Foster already had been planning to do so, said spokeswoman Marsanne Golsby.

"It was already on the front burner. He's always talking about how you can walk across the Atchafalaya, it's so dry," she said.

Lutz said he could not even guess how much water would be enough. "The more, the better," he said. "We almost couldn't have too much at this point."

Crawfish try to burrow until several inches of water seeps into their holes from the sides. They spend most of their time above the water; dipping into it when they need to wet their gills.

They can survive even if they cannot burrow far enough to find water but would have trouble when it came time to lay their eggs, Lutz said.

That is because the mother crawfish attaches the eggs to the bottom of her tail with a jelly-like substance which needs to touch water to harden into glue.

And even crawfish which have been able to reproduce successfully may be reluctant to come out unless they know there is water for them, he said.

"You hear lots of old-time Cajun folks say crawfish won't come out until it hears thunder.

Sometimes you almost have to force that crawfish out of its burrow, which is what would happen when those areas become inundated," he said.

It's hard to say how much Breaux's proposal will help, he said. "But we certainly have to have some water out there if we're going to have any hope of a wild harvest this season."