Buying La. crawfish angers Ark. producer

DERMOTT, Ark. (AP) — A decision to import crawfish from Louisiana for a festival saluting the crustacean's growing popularity has left a bad taste with an Arkansas crawfish farmer.

But organizers of Dermott's May 19-20 Crawfish Festival say the Louisiana producer made a better offer for 6,000 pounds of the delicate creatures, which have been harvested for years in the Bayou State.

"There's a lot of people who are upset about it," said Vickie Duncan, co-owner of Crawdad Hole, a crawfish producer in Dermott. "Dermott is supposed to be the crawfish capital of Arkansas, yet they're going to be using Louisiana crawfish."

Duncan's company lost in the bidding to supply crawfish for the festival, which is sponsored by the Dermott Chamber of Commerce.

Festival co-chairman Ben Bynum said he agreed that using out-of-state crawfish for the Arkansas celebration seems counterproductive.

"It certainly is, but we put it out on a bid," Bynum said.

The contract went to Riceland Crawfish of Eunice, La., which agreed to supply crawfish for $1.05 a pound. Bynum said Ms. Duncan's bid of $1.43 a pound would have cost the chamber at least $2,280 more than the Louisiana offer.

And Bynum said it's important to consider economics of staging the festival, because its profits are set aside for property on which the chamber hopes to establish an industrial park.

"This is actually the first time we've used bidding to see if we could save some money to buy the industrial site," Bynum said.

Duncan, provider of crawfish for last year's festival, said the Louisiana product won't be as good as what she was offering, because her proposal included a process of purging the creatures in pure water.

Tony Breaux, spokesman for Riceland Crawfish, said that to put his crawfish through that process would raise the price by about 25 cents a pound.

Duncan said the lack of processing won't be popular with Arkansas crawfish eaters. "You can get dead ones, dirt and bait with them. That's what they'll get at the festival. You get what you pay for," she said. Breaux responded that Arkansans won't be able to tell the difference "if you haven't had them before."

Arkansas' 30 to 40 crawfish producers turn out about 150,000 pounds a year, said Van Pennington, Desha county agent for the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service.

Pennington said the Arkansas crawfish industry has a bright future, but "they're more efficient down there (in Louisiana). They've been at it longer and are more committed."