Cajun crawfish vs. Chinese crawfish

State industry banking on home-grown campaign

By Bill Decker
Staff Writer

Industry representatives say they're satisfied with the response to Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odum's appeal to consumers to buy Louisiana crawfish instead of the Chinese variety.

But they're still not sure if even a full-scale retail boycott will prevent damage to the domestic industry.

The response is "definitely helping us in Louisiana," said Roy Robin, a crawfish processor with Bayou Land Seafood.

"I think at the retail level, it helps quite a bit," said Roy Johnson, director of market development for the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry.

"It's been fantastic," said Harold Benoit, chairman of the Louisiana Crawfish Promotion and Research Board.

Benoit said nobody has statistics detailed enough to determine whether a few weeks of consumer campaigning have made a difference. For one thing, Benoit said, restaurants are a major users of crawfish tail meat, and they often order frozen crawfish too far in advance to have been affected.

By at least one measure, the campaign has had an effect: Producers aren't calling Benoit every day to ask what he's doing about imports.

"Apparently it's done considerable good," Benoit said. "I've had two calls in the last week, and neither one was irate. They were both asking, 'What else can we do?'"

Johnson said consumers are starting to call the Agriculture Department to report that they've spotted Chinese crawfish in stores, so he and others close to the domestic industry say they're encouraged.

But soon Louisiana processors will face decisions about how many whole crawfish to buy, process, freeze and store in peeled form for sale after the crawfish season ends this spring. Some of the observers fear that crawfish farmers, trying to read an unstable market, will convert their acreage back to rice or other grain farming.

But those steps aren't necessarily permanent, said Jay Huner, a USL professor who studies aquaculture. "There's one major benefit to crawfish farming. It's easy to get back into it."

Robin, who said Bayou Land has sold imported crawfish meat in the past, said he's worried about the impact of imports on the local industry. He believes Louisiana crawfish producers have already lost a potential market in Texas because of imported meat.

Huner said Louisiana's crawfish industry harvests about 100 million pounds of whole crawfish each year. Benoit said Atchafalaya Basin harvest varies widely, but in the average year the basin and farms each account for about half the whole-crawfish production.

Of the 100 million pounds of crawfish, about half are sold whole. The remaining crawfish are processed into about 5 million pounds of tail meat.

Some estimates say that about 1 million pounds of processed meat is being imported from China in a season, threatening a fifth of the market for local crawfish.

That's because labor and other processing costs are lower in China, Huner said.

Benoit said the promotion board isn't sure about the 1 million pound estimate for imports. But he said the board has traced shipping documents that show at least 200,000 pounds of Chinese crawfish meat have entered the country.