The industry may be suffering growing pains as it enters the new season, but the crawfish are doing just fine, thank you. Many of the crawfish given a reprieve last year because of a supply glut and price crash will find their luck has run out. And farmers are improving their efficiency and timing, with more trying to get their crawfish on the market early, when demand and prices are highest.

"A lot of people are saying that they've never seen this many crawfish in their ponds," says Tom Hymel, marine agent with the cooperative extension service for Iberia and St. Martin parishes. "This is a pivotal year for many producers. They need to make some money or do something else."

Bobby Guilbeau of Prejean's Restaurant north of Lafayette is pleased with the crawfish he is buying at current prices of about $1.10 a pound. "The product this year is good. I've seen more crawfish early this year than I've ever seen before," he says.

Last season, says Hymel, was "a different type of year." A combination of more farmers, poor economy and an unusually good yield of larger, more uniform "wild" crawfish from the Atchafalaya Basin led to a glut and prices sometimes as low as 25 to 30 cents a pound, less than the 50 to 60 cents the majority of farmers need to break even. "You don't even make your bait money back," he says.

Up to half the crawfish were left in the ponds in the area, Hymel says. And although demand is high now because it's early in the season, and prices consequently are at a premium range of 75 cents to $1.25 per pound, Hymel isn't predicting a trend toward increased prices. "We had a number of farmers flood early this year, in September, to take advantage of the higher prices," Hymel says. But flooding a pond early to get the crawfish up from their burrows is risky because of temperamental fall weather—an early cold snap can ruin the harvest.

Guilbeau notes that the current demand is outstripping the supply, even with increased early harvesting. "The demand picked up and the supply has gone down in the Henderson area," he says.

With that early demand, Bayouland Seafood in Henderson hasn't had to begin processing yet, says Ray Robin, one of the Robin family members involved in the business. "Right now, we're selling all our crawfish live," he says. And the demand exceeds supply: Bayouland Seafood, which employs about 120 people at peak production, could sell more crawfish if it could find more. The company is paying between 90 cents and $1 a pound.

"The crawfish are looking better and better as years go by, because the farmers are learning how to produce crawfish better," Robin says. Techniques such as seeding ponds with wild crawfish and the use of a combine to dredge a pond and bring out more crawfish have improved the yield and the quality of the product, Robin says.

But crawfishing still isn't as easy as some may think with the increasing popularity of the seafood nationwide and in Europe. While the farmers in this area haven't been as affected, the lack of rain this fall caused saltwater to move in from the marshes and hurt the ponds of the coastal parishes, according to Hymel. The more efficient farmers and those who time their harvests to beat the basin yield later in the year are the ones who will flourish, he says. Others may be trying something else this time next year.