Corps diverting flow into Atchafalaya Basin

Water needed for crawfish crop

by Steven K. Landry
Cade/Crawfish Center

- Diverting Mississippi River waters into the Atchafalaya River to improve dry Basin conditions for the crawfish industry will help, but not save, this year's poor crawfish crop, according to a University of Louisiana at Lafayette marine specialist.

The Corps began diverting Mississippi waters toward the Atchafalaya River this past Saturday, according to U.S. Army Corps Engineer Col. Thomas Julich.

Gov. Mike Foster — upon a request from St. Martin Parish President Scott Angelle and then U.S. Sen. John Breaux — asked that the Army Corps "deviate flow from the Old River for the benefit of crawfish production, provided the deviation has no adverse impact on other interests."

In a March 10 letter to the Corps' New Orleans District, Major General Phillip R. Anderson said he received the governor's request and directed the Corps to "increase flow into the Atchafalaya Basin to 32% for a two-week period."

Normally, the Mississippi's flow into the Basin is 30%.

It may be "too little, too late" for this crawfish season, said Jay Huner, the director of the ULL Crawfish Research Center here.

"No matter how much freshwater is diverted, this will still be the worst crawfish season ever," said Huner, who oversees 40 acres of crawfish ponds at the ULL facility off La. 92.

"No matter how much freshwater is diverted this will be the worst crawfish season in history. I hope I'm wrong, but I don't want people to get false hopes."

—Jay Huner
ULL Crawfish Center director

"Any additional freshwater put in will help," Huner told the Teche News Friday, the day before the Corps began shifting water to the drying Basin.

"And I hope, very sincerely, that I'm wrong, but I don't want people to get false hopes that there's going to be all kinds of crawfish now," Huner said.

Parish President Angelle said Monday that he would personally monitor the river stages at Butte LaRose over the next two weeks, and that if crawfish farmers needed another boost to possibly save some of their crop for 2000, he would request the diversion again.

"It's better than standing on the sideline and just complaining," said Angelle, who concurred that Huner's prediction may be true but added that he initiated the request because the industry is vitally important to St. Martin Parish.

With impetus from (See CRAWFISH, Pg. A-B)
**Crawfish**

Angelle and a subsequent resolution by the Parish Council, Sen. Breaux's request last Thursday that Gov. Mike Foster ask the general Basin was welcomed more freshwater into the Basin, flooding these low areas," he said.

Why no crawfish in January and February?

Huner said "it usually takes about three months for the little ones to reach the size you can normally use, because the water is cold."

But a few decades ago, farmers got wise and tried to fool Mother Nature. "Crawfish farmers circumvented that normal pattern by putting water in their ponds in September-October so they'd have a longer period. They've capitalized on being able to provide water for baby crawfish earlier than what naturally occurs in the Basin, so they have crawfish to sell before the wild crawfish come in," Huner said.

People here don't usually see any appreciable amount of Basin crawfish until late March through May, Huner said.

**But Crawfish Fest will have ample supply**

*by Steven K. Landry, Breaux Bridge*

For those worried about a crawfish shortage for the May 5-7 Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival, worry not: BBCFA organizers are ensuring that there will be enough to go around by that time.

BBCFA President Mark Bernard said Chez Sidney out of Catahoula, the prime supplier of the festival's 8,000 to 9,000 pounds of crawfish usually boiled, has confirmed that the bugs will be boiling for the approximately 30,000 people expected to crowd into Parc Hardy.

"Early on it was a concern, but in talking to Pee Wee (Sidney Guidry, Chez Sidney owner) I feel comfortable that there will be some. But they won't be real big," he said.

"I've even had some people ask me if there's going to be a festival. But we'd have a festival regardless. We will have some crawfish. And it will be American crawfish, no matter how slim the supply is," Bernard said.

Both Atchafalaya Basin and pond crawfish will comprise this year's batch, as is the case every year, Bernard added.

According to a March 3 letter Col. Julich sent to Angelle, rain indeed has fallen during the past two or three years has thrown the Basin cycle out of the prevailing pattern.

The normal cycle is a wet, cool season then a dry, warm season, with crawfish adjusting their life cycle to that pattern.

"Basically, when the water accumulates during the cool season, crawfish, which have been in burrows, come out and release their young, which were produced during the dry season," Huner said.

Rivers are very low in the fall going into the winter, and in November-December the state usually starts getting some rain, he said. The rain fills the dry parts of the Basin, and normally female crawfish come out with their young, which start growing.

"Then, starting in January, we start getting high water from the Mississippi River that raises water in the Basin, flooding these low areas," he said.

**But these scenarios only apply during "normal" years, which the past few years have not been, he said. The Basin was bone dry during the period where normally we have water falling to make the crawfish nursery areas," he said.

"And often the female crawfish will eat the little ones that can't come out. And if they don't eat them, the little ones may just die because they run out of food," he said.

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