SOMETHING WONDERFUL happens early in the year, when the Atchafalaya River rises above the 12-foot mark at Butte la Rose. Uncounted thousands of Procambarus clarkii — red swamp crawfish — crawl out of their burrows and into the water that floods the lower Atchafalaya Basin.

Two or three months later, after the burrow-born babies have had time to eat themselves into market size, the harvest of Louisiana’s wild crawfish crop begins. Trapped in baited wire cages, the crawfish are delivered mainly to processors. Some, the processors sell live to seafood dealers and restaurants; others are peeled for their tail meat. In either case, the crawfish end up on someone’s newspaper or plate.

For decades, the wild Basin crop and crawfish caught non-commercially in ditches and natural ponds were all the crawfish to be had in Louisiana. But in 1949, according to a 1976 University of Southwestern Louisiana marketing study, "domestic production of crawfish began in ponds and rice fields."

Nevertheless, only recently has crawfish farming begun developing into a large-scale industry. In the early ’60s, according to Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service County Agent Warren Beaugh, there were about 3,000 acres of crawfish ponds in the state. By 1980 there were about 50,000 acres, according to Don Gooch, director of USL’s Crawfish Research Center. This year, nearly 100,000 acres are devoted to crawfish farming, Gooch said, and the acreage “should double” in the next few years.

The $18 million-a-year crawfish-farming business, Gooch said, “is booming so fast that research can’t keep up with it.”

Whether the crawfish business continues to boom may depend on how the industry solves marketing and production problems that become more critical as crawfish-pond acreage increases. Orrin Dupuis, president of the Louisiana Crawfish Farmers Association, thinks the most pressing of those problems is that the market area for crawfish is confined essentially by New Orleans to the east, Houston to the west and Alexandria to the north. Markets he said, should be developed on the West Coast, in large Midwest cities, and particularly along the Atlantic Seaboard, which Dupuis terms “our main target right now.”

Dupuis and other crawfish farmers hope that an expanded market will increase profitability, which would increase crawfish-pond acreage and production.

Others, including Gooch, think the industry’s first priority should be to learn

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The crawfish business

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how to produce larger, more consistent crops and improve processing and packaging methods to better guarantee consistent supplies.

The Louisiana crawfish business, Gooch said, has been successful mostly because of the crawfish themselves. "The species has been responsible," he said, "it's so hardy; there are no known diseases that affect production."

Despite the growth of the business, Gooch said, farmers still have little control over their crop. "There's not one crawfish farmer that can tell you what his brood stock is," Gooch said. Inconsistent production and pond failures have been "man-made" by the large number of crawfish farmers who have entered the business in the past several years.

Among the reasons for that influx are government programs that have made it more profitable to convert rice acreage to crawfish ponds. Rice farmers may set aside up to 20 percent of their acreage, according to Dupuis, and the federal government will guarantee the price of the rice grown on the rest of their acreage. In addition, he said, under the payment-in-kind program is up for renewal annually. Farmers and harvesters overwhelm-ingly approved a referendum that will allow a four-of-a-cent assessment to be collected for each pound of artificial crawfish bait sold beginning Dec. 1. The program will be administered by a 10-member board appointed by the governor and representing crawfish farmers, harvesters, bait producers, processors, restaurant owners and New Orleans retail seafood dealers.

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