Crawfish catch ‘just ain’t happening’

By Pamela Glisson
Business Writer

Anyone planning a crawfish boil is advised by experts to check seafood dealers in advance to verify adequate supply. “It looks as though it’s going to be another short season,” said Perry Lavergne, president of the Crawfish Farmers Association in New Iberia.

Lavergne said major crawfish laying that normally occurs in late October or early November was lost; therefore, he predicts a repeat scenario of last year, when production was short until the spring.

He explained that, following the freezing temperatures of about a month ago, the weather since then has been mostly “unseasonably warm.” Neither the freeze nor the warmth are problems in themselves, he said, but extendedly warm water tends to decay vegetation in crawfish ponds, depleting oxygen.

The situation not only isn’t conducive for laying, but also ruins the normal food supply for existing fish, who Lavergne said then become “stunted.”

Regarding current catches, then, he claimed, “It’s just not happening, so it’s got us a little worried.”

At the Crawfish Express, where Lavergne is a part-owner, he said about 1,000-2,000 pounds of crawfish now are being sold daily, whereas in the peak season of March or April, daily sales are 17,000-18,000 pounds.

Not only are there fewer crawfish to sell, but this year’s prices for farmers across the market also are low. Although Lavergne said retail prices of $1.10 to $1.25 per pound are “pretty much in line with last year,” the price paid to farmers has dropped from its range of 90 cents to a dollar a pound last year to about 70 cents a pound now.

“That is a substantial difference,” he said, guessing that the main reason for the drop probably is middlemen sellers trying to increase their margins.

The Crawfish Express sells homegrown crawfish of the owners as well as crawfish grown by about 12 other farmers, but Lavergne said the prices he quoted are indicative of the market as a whole rather than his store, which he said was created to give farmers a better market choice.

“We’re hoping that by the first of the year crawfish production will pick up,” Lavergne said. But he doubts that the next laying in February will make up for the fall’s loss.

That laying, he claimed, will come too late to address the biggest consumer demand time from Jan. 1 through Easter. “That’s the time of the year when people in Acadiana really grub out on crawfish,” he said.

Lavergne said more promotion on the part of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion Board, the Louisiana Crawfish Promotion Board, and restaurants could have helped fall movement of crawfish. But he quickly added that there wouldn’t have been enough crawfish to address additional demand anyway.