Crawfish facility unveiled

Plant to boost soft-shelled variety output

By VICKI FERSTEL
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VACHERIE - Behind a 47-foot by 70-foot building here lies a graveyard of machinery - a testament to the three years of trial and error Max Rodrigue, his family and Louisiana State University professors put into constructing an automated, soft-shelled crawfish production facility.

On Tuesday, the Rodrigues and federal, state and local officials, and others interested in the soft-shell crawfish industry, attended the unveiling of the prototype facility. They say they hope the facility will revitalize the flagging soft-shell crawfish industry.

Up until now, soft-shell crawfish has been produced on a mom-and-pop basis, with many producers housing trays of young crawfish in garages or sheds.

In a time-consuming process, producers had to employ hand the crawfish - the same species as the hard-shell crawfish - from the trays and then have to sort them by weight, size and sex.

The hand-picking operations generally produce four pounds of soft-shell crawfish per square foot annually at a cost of between $2 and $3 per pound.

The new technology, which automatically sorts the crawfish, is expected to increase production to 40 pounds per square foot at a cost of between $2 and $3 per pound, according to LSU literature.

Max Rodrigue, 67, was the chief engineer at St. James Sugar Co-op when, in 1966, he decided to open his own machine shop. Rodrigue and his sons - Vernon, 39, Tommy, 38, and Leslie, 37 - formed Vacherie Machine and Fabrication Co. in 1974.

In a three-year period, Max Rodrigue said he spent $240,000 of his own money on the facility on which the machineshop is located.

Max and his sons formed Armant Aquaculture Inc. - named after the plantation on which the machine shop and crawfish facility stand.

They built four different tray configurations, two different conveyor systems and two collection systems, all at a cost of between $5 and $6 per pound.

Visitors crowd into Armant Aquaculture Inc. of Vacherie as the company begins production of soft-shelled crawfish using automated equipment.

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visors said they hope the facility will be adequate to the demand for soft-shell crawfish.

In their heyday, soft-shell crawfish producers could fetch between $4 and $5 a pound from the buyers, who then could resell them for up to $12 a pound, Beatty said.

But soft-shell crawfish sales at Ralph & Kacoo's Restaurants have been increasing, said executive vice president and general manager Gerald.

Another market innovation has been the calcium stones inside the crawfish prior to packaging, Gerald said. When the price drops enough, the market will shift from sou chefs to at-home cooks, he said.

"It (the automated production facility) is coming along at a perfect time when the industry really needs the help," Gerald said.

"Some people will be hurt by (the project). But my business is increasing," Beatty said.

"We're not competing with all other offerings, but we are going to have it off our plate," Gerald said.

"It was the Fiberglas (for the trays) that sort of stumped us for a while," Vernon Rodrigue said.

In a three-year period, Max Rodrigue spent $140,000 of his own money on the project, Vernon Rodrigue said.

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