Crawfish garbage may be cold cash in the pocket

By GUY COATES
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Crawfish tails are a mainstay to Cajun diets. But the leftovers are a $1 million garbage problem in Louisiana, and a researcher wants to turn the mess into a new industry.

Eighty-five percent of the crawfish cannot be eaten, so tons of stinking heads and shells are thrown away each spring. In St. Martin Parish, for example, it costs $200,000 a year just to bury the waste.

Samuel Meyers, a professor at LSU, has been working on the problem for years and said he may have found a way to convert the stench into the smell of dollars: Make chicken feed or fish feed out of the leavings.

St. Martin Parish is working with LSU to finish the research that has been underway for nearly a decade. They hope they'll know in six months if the project will work.

Meyers, a food and marine scientist, has been working under the Sea Grant Program on means of using the new feed in the so-called pond farming.

Meyers already has sent some of the product to the Northwest and he said salmon farmers are overjoyed. Shipments have also gone to Japan for pond operations involving sea bream.

Pond-grown salmon don't have the natural pink color of those from natural streams and the pink color helps growth and flavor.

That's where the crawfish comes in. "We extract the pigment from the crawfish," Meyers said. "The pigment is oil soluble. We use soy oil in the process and end up with pigment-rich oil. It's a cooking, grinding type of extraction and we end up with a meal."

"The protein-rich meal can be used for various livestock diets, diets for poultry, for the pet industry as well as for fish. The pink pigment has an effect on growth and reproduction and helps the flavor of the meat."

"You might not know this but flamingos would be white but their diet includes so many crustaceans that they turn pink."

The problem now is to determine if the process can be cost-efficient on a large scale.

St. Martin Parish is one of the few places in the nation where there is enough waste to make such an industry profitable, said Meyers.

The parish has 29 pond farms and ends up with tons of crawfish waste. It accounts for much of the 20 million pounds of crawfish harvested in Louisiana each year.

Of that total, 18 million pounds is waste. Synthetic pigment now sells for $400 a pound, LSU officials said.

Meyers said a processing business might be able to net $500,000 for every 10 million pounds of waste. "I believe that's a conservative estimate," he said.

A processing plant would need only 10 or 15 employees, he added.

MESS OF CRAWFISH — Crawfish like these are a mainstay to Cajun diets, but the uneaten parts are causing an expensive mess in the state of Louisiana. Eighty-five percent of a crawfish is not consumed, so tons of stinking heads and shells are a $1 million garbage problem in the state.