Crawfish helps farmers diversify

Although southwest Louisiana's crawfish farmers have weathered some difficult years, experts agree the industry will further mature, leading to crop diversification and development of better farming technology.

A case in point is the region's crawfish industry.

Crawfish farming, a relatively recent aquaculture industry jumped from less than 20,000 acres in the early 1980s to more than 135,000 acres, according to Larry Michaud, a spokesman for the state Department of Agriculture and Forestry.

The LSU extension service reports that an estimated 2,000 people participate in the industry as farmers, graders, bait suppliers and harvesters. The state has about 2,700 people who are seasonal employees.

Michaud said Louisiana's crawfish production has grown as consumer demand increased, spilling over into foreign markets as well. But, he adds, recent imports of crawfish harvested in China are endangering the state's crawfish industry.

Michaud said he believes Chinese production costs are substantially lower than labor costs here, squeezing profit margins. He said he remains optimistic about the industry's long-term survival, but believes "the Chinese product is here to stay."

However, the region's crawfish industry in 1989 dropped a staggering 45 percent in terms of revenues, generating about $30.6 million in gross farm value compared to about $53.8 million in 1992.

Dwight Landreneau, an LSU extension service aquaculture agent, said crawfish farm production turned lower in 1993 primarily because of extended investigations shows area crawfish farmers are facing downward pricing pressures for peeler grade crawfish.

But, he added, the industry can survive through better conservation harvesting and processing methods.

Landreneau said he believes the region could further diversify its aquaculture industry. He said catfish ponds could be a growth industry, but they require substantial capital and are a "risky investment."