Crawfish Industry Booms

(Editor’s note: This is the first of a two-part series on the pond crawfish industry.)

Market incentives and technological advances have moved the Louisiana pond crawfish industry to the point of taking off as a major farming enterprise.

In terms of acres of edible crops under cultivation, it currently ranks fifth behind soybeans, rice, wheat and sugarcane.

There are 92,000 acres of crawfish ponds being farmed statewide in 1983. Twenty thousand acres were added this year, according to Larry de la Bretonne, crawfish specialist with LSU’s Cooperative Extension Service.

With that increase comes the need to find markets outside Louisiana to absorb the 45 to 50 million pounds of crawfish expected to be harvested this year, Commissioner of Agriculture Bob Odom said. "Now we feel crawfishing has a solid future as a large cash crop for Louisiana farmers," he added. "We are going to move aggressively to secure stable markets outside Louisiana to insure that future."

Availability Varies

The Atchafalaya Basin has historically been Louisiana’s source of crawfish, but availability fluctuated wildly from year to year. A successful season depended on a combination of favorable summer, fall and spring weather. The basin crawfish were available for only three months. However with the large scale addition of pond acreage, live crawfish are now becoming available from November through early April, which coupled with stripping the fat off the crawfish give them a shelf life of 12 months.

A major technological breakthrough has been the development of the automatic crawfish peeling, deveining and cleaning machine. Steve Afeman of Bayouland Ecrevisse near Franklin, along with his assistant James Voisin, started designing the machine in 1975 and got it fully operational in 1981.

New Device

Voisin is now putting the finishing touches on a device that will make their operation completely automated; a machine to take the heads off the crawfish before the tails are fed into the automatic peeler.

With the peeler and 15 people working around it, Afeman’s plant now puts out 2,000 pounds of peeled tails a day. “It would take 75 to 80 hand peelers to equal that output a day,” he says.

In addition to the peeling, the machine also strips the vein and fat from the crawfish and partially precooks it at the same temperature for a fixed time. This gives an unvarying consistency to the marketed crawfish and is an important key to gaining national and international markets. "It’s critical that the Louisiana crawfish industry set and maintain a standard for precooking for all crawfish shipped to other markets,” he said. "The management of a restaurant in San Francisco or New York has got to be able to pass along the cooking instructions to its chef who knows nothing about crawfish so he can prepare the dish the exact same every time,” Afeman said.

There are also market incentives which are boosting the fortunes of the industry. One incentive is at the federal level. Because of the surplus of many crops produced by U.S. farmers, and to qualify for several federal programs, the federal government is requiring that farmers take some of their acres out of production and dedicate them to “conservation” practices.