Crawfish industry losing the fight against imports

By Jonas Breaux
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Louisiana's crawfish industry is, for now, enduring a devastating blow from cheap tail meat being imported from China.

Harold Benoit, chairman of the Louisiana Crawfish Promotion and Resource Board, said imported crawfish tail meat could push Louisiana processed meat out of the market.

Benoit predicts that if low-priced Chinese tail meat continues to flood U.S. markets (as it has over the past four years), Bayou State processors could be forced to shut down altogether leaving live crawfish as Louisiana's signature crawfish product.

After almost 15 years of advancements in crop production, harvesting techniques and market shares, the Louisiana crawfish industry is being undermined by the influx of cheap — real cheap — imported tail meat, according to the LCPRB chairman.

"Crawfish tail meat from China has been coming into this country since the late 1980's," Benoit said. "If cheap Chinese crawfish continues to flood the market it will definitely have a negative impact on our industry."

Louisiana's 123-plus crawfish processors cannot compete with a product that is sold for half the price they can produce it. Benoit said Chinese tail meat is commonly sold to retailers for $3 per pound or lower.

According to Benoit, Louisiana tail meat cannot be processed as cheaply as Chinese imports. The burden of labor and insurance costs, alone, are variables which push the price of local tail meat above that of imports.

The LCPRB chairman admits that lower prices for imported meat are a plus for consumers but could spell doom for local processors.

"The dollar bill talks loud," Benoit said. "Something has to be done to protect our markets. If something is not done, and soon, there will be a lot of processors, peelers and others in the industry standing in unemployment lines."

Harold Benoit

Approximately 185,000 pounds of tail meat were brought into the U.S. in 1989, according to information gathered by a federal agency hired by the LCPRB.

"The board spent between $12,000 to $15,000 to have the Journal of Commerce's Port, Import/Export Reporting Service (PIERS) conduct a paper chase to see where the tail meat was coming from and who was shipping it," Benoit said. "The PIERS people found that about 185,000 pounds of meat were shipped to the U.S. in 1989 and that most of the meat was distributed by two Houston-based distributors."

"With the help of PIERS, personnel with the Food and Drug Administration and Immigrations Department, took samples of tail meat when it hit the docks in California," he said. "The samples were analyzed and the FDA found no real problems with the product."

Benoit said when the import problem was presented to members of Louisiana's congressional delegation in Washington, Senators John Breaux and Bennett Johnston both told him to compile a report showing how the imported meat was adversely affecting the Louisiana industry.

According to Benoit, the senators told him that once it was determined the imports were hurting Louisiana's industry, they would have a foundation from which to seek tariffs or set quotas.
A local crawfisherman goes to work near Crowley recently.

on the Chinese imports.

“We did begin a report and things were looking pretty good for our case,” Benoit said. “But a change in personnel with the agency we were working with resulted in the report being scrapped.”

Roy Robin, who owns and operates Bayouland Seafood north of Henderson, said there is no way he can match the price of imported tail meat.

When asked if there were specific markets where he has had to compete with the Chinese product head-on, he replied, “Yes, wherever crawfish meat is being sold, they can undersell me or any other Louisiana processor.”

Robin said the only way for him to compete with the Chinese meat is to cut the price he pays pond and basin fishermen for their live product.

“If we can’t pay the pond fisher-

men what they need to make a profit they will simply be forced to stop fishing,” Robin said. “Our industry needs pond crawfish to survive.”

According to Benoit, Louisiana has approximately 1,600 pond producers fishing about 114,000 acres.

He said last year ponds produced approximately 54 million pounds of crawfish, with the Atchafalaya Basin producing a bumper crop in the range of 69 million pounds.

“The bottom line here is that the general public and our politicians need to know how adversely our crawfish industry is being impacted by this Chinese tail meat,” Robin said. “All we’re asking for is to be put on a competitive level with the imports. If we don’t get some help in the form of tariffs, import quotas or whatever, we’ll be putting a lot more people around here on welfare.”