Crawfish industry needs breakthroughs

By CALVIN LEAR

Louisiana's crawfish industry needs breakthroughs in the harvesting and peeling processes to stay healthy, a USL aquaculture professor said Thursday.

"Sixty-five percent of the cost to farmers is in harvesting -- the labor and the bait and traps," Dr. Jay Huner, head of USL's Crawfish Center, told the Lafayette Rotary Club at its luncheon.

"If automated harvesting or peeling devices are developed, even if it cut costs by only 10 percent, it would help," Huner said.

"If we could get both processes automated, the entire industry would be restructured."

For now, though, the price of crawfish to farmers has reached a level of "marginal profitability," he said, and they will likely be forced to cut back on production next year to keep profit levels the same.

LSU's Extension Service estimates as much as a 30-percent cut-back on acreage used for growing crawfish could occur, Huner said. The result could be an increase in price per pound for consumers.

He said a major challenge for the industry is to convince people from outside of Louisiana who aren't familiar with crawfish to differentiate between crawfish and shrimp meat.

"Right now, they think of both as the same," he said.

Huner, who has published a book on crawfish, gave Rotarians an overview of the international crawfish industry.

Louisiana produces 75 percent of all the crawfish in the world, the lion's share, with 50,000 metric tons a year, Huner said. Most of this production is within a 75-mile radius of Lafayette.

"When they see a picture of a table covered with crawfish in Louisiana, they go somewhat berserk," Huner said.

The red swamp crawfish of Louisiana withstands the same fungus that has killed off some types of crawfish in Europe. Turkey, for instance, produced up to 8,000 tons a year as late as 1985, but now only produces 500 tons since its crop was struck with the crawfish fungus plague, he said.

Spain potentially could threaten Louisiana's markets in Europe if it ever decides to push its crawfish industry, Huner said. The Spaniards produce the red swamp variety of crawfish, he said, at about 5,000 tons a year. In Spain, crawfish are considered wild game, and fishermen are allowed on private property to catch them, he said.

Crawfish is considered a delicacy in Europe, going for $1 each in some restaurants, with five or six served with an order, Huner said. Europeans don't go for packaged, peeled crawfish meat, he said, because they consider eating crawfish a ritual.

"They're the same crawfish we have," he said.