Crawfish Licensing Deferred For Session

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Crawfish fishermen who can ply their trade without worry about bothersome government rules may soon find themselves facing the same regulations as shrimpers and crabbers.

The government isn’t pressuring the case, however; the crawfish industry is. A proposal introduced in the Legislature this session would, for the first time, require crawfish fishermen to have licenses and would keep people who don’t have them from their catch. It also would set rules for the way crawfish are caught.

The proposed bill by Rep. Jesse Guidry of Cecilia isn’t going to pass this year, but is a first step toward bringing government regulations to crawfish fishing. Guidry said he offered the licensing bill when crawfish fishermen came to him asking for help.

“It was so we would know how many fishermen there are and where, and to try to put a handle on what the crawfish industry is so we can stabilize it and try to perpetuate it,” he said in an interview.

Guidry scheduled committee hearings on his bill but deferred it for the rest of the session when opponents showed up to complain about the measure.

He said he will hold public hearings before next session to find out what the people want, and what they need.

“We want to get information from all sides,” he said.

The crawfish catch in the Atchafalaya Basin was bad this year, Guidry said, and many fishermen were hurt financially.

The proposed regulations would not apply to pond crawfish, that is those grown commercially in special lagoons.

Guidry said he offered the bill largely “to create discussion.”

“We’ll probably hold one hearing on the west bank of the Basin and one on the east bank,” Guidry said, mentioning the towns of Pierre Part and Henderson.

No date has been set for the hearings.

Meanwhile, the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries advises crawfish fishermen to go slowly in pressing for regulations.

“If the crawfish industry wants to have licenses imposed, we have no problem with that,” said wildlife official Kenneth Smith.

But he said the experts oppose proposals to limit the mesh size of crawfish traps.

He said people who propose a small mesh size to keep fishermen from catching smaller crawfish don’t understand the difference between crawfish and shrimp.

Shrimpers are not allowed to take small shrimp because experts say that would eventually wipe out the catch.

But Smith said crawfish are affected much more than shrimp by their environment, the temperature, water depth and silt level.

“Any crawfish that is big enough to be sold commercially should be taken from the swamp,” he said. “They should take them while they can.”

Leaving behind the smaller crawfish won’t guarantee there will be a better catch in the future, he said.

“We don’t advise any more restrictions that necessary,” Smith added.