Crawfish processors question their role in future of industry

By BILL BROWN
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BREAUX BRIDGE — Many Acadiana crawfish processors are questioning their role in the industry, predicting that in the future, they'll be out of business.

They do not foresee the demise of the crawfish, but they don't have a clue as to how the "mud bugs" will be packaged and marketed. They see government interference and over-regulation as the culprit driving them from business.

One such processor is Norton Patin, owner of Basin Crawfish Processors, Inc., of Breaux Bridge.

"We have got to deal with the Department of Transportation, the Agriculture Department, the Health Department, the Labor Department, the Department of Taxation, the Internal Revenue Service, the State Environment people and the EPA. It never ends!" Patin disdainfully shuffled piles papers on his desk and added, "My net profit used to be pretty close to 12 percent. Now, I'm under 5 percent."

The processors add feel that they need the sympathetic ear of a lawmaker to enact legislation that will reduce the bureaucratic load that prevents them from expanding their businesses.

Patin estimates that his company is one of approximately 40 processors in St. Martin Parish. Basin Crawfish, which employs between 60 and 80 pickers, is one of the larger companies. Also, Patin processes crabs which extends his employment period.

He operates his company with his wife Eugenie and son Scotty. In an average year, Basin Crawfish will package between 1 and 1.5 million pounds of crawfish, most of it destined for a major grocery chain.

Most of the crawfish he buys is trapped in the Basin, but some is farm harvested.

Last year, "just about" 40 million pounds of crawfish were harvested in Louisiana, and 50 percent to 60 percent of that came from St. Martin Parish, Patin says.

In Cecilia, a plant larger than Basin Crawfish is in operation, and there are several in the Henderson, Parks and St. John area.

"We stay in touch with each other, and the problems that I have, they have," Patin told The Advertiser. The processors collectively believe they are being overburdened by laws that restrict their rights to hire pickers as contract laborers, and the Workers Compensation rates are becoming unmanageable for small businessmen.

"My worker's compensation insurance is up around the 11.11 percent range," Patin said. "That's very close to what they would pay in a meat cutting plant — and we use no sharp instruments for processing crawfish.

The processors cannot understand why their labor force cannot be contracted labor, "like the citrus industry or farmers on the west coast, who hire their people only for the harvest season. Ours is seasonal work, but we're told we have to hire people as our employees, pay their taxes, social security — the works, all because they work under a roof we provide."

Patin also expresses frustration over the seasons. He doesn't earn money until March, April, May and part of June.

"And then all the conditions have to be right, like the water and the weather." According to Patin, the last two years have been average.

"There's enough that I need more pickers," he says. "You can always tell when the economy is improving, because all the pickers find steady jobs."

A year ago there were too many people looking for work, according to Scotty Patin. This year, there aren't enough.

There are 20 to 30 people who have worked as pickers at Basin Crawfish Processors for the last six years — mainly older people or mothers working while the kids are in school. For the most part pickers will move from one processor to the next, Patin said.

Crabs are completely different. They are harvested in July, August, September, October and November.

"We work the plant around the clock, seven days a week," Scotty says. "There is even a separate picking crew that works during the crab season."

The Vietnamese are by far the fastest crab pickers since they have had experience with crabs, according to the family.

Crab picking requires the use of a special knife that becomes the extension of a finger, and some pickers also use a dull knife to crack the shell. Basin Crawfish Processors sell all their crab meat to one food manufacturer who pasturizes the meat, repacks it and markets it on the east coast.

"Crabs are a better business," Patin commented. "They are not as labor intensive."

Basin Crawfish injected approximately $300,000 in payroll into the Breaux Bridge economy last year. Should Norton Patin be correct in his prediction that he and other processors, "will fall by the wayside, like small family farms," Breaux Bridge and other small communities, will feel the impact of a faltering economy.