Crawfish production better than expected

By Pamela Glisson
Business Writer

Last summer's drought did nothing for the confidence of local crawfish farmers. First, they witnessed a resulting drop in baby fish. Then the mild weather of the past winter depleted pond oxygen, causing more fish loss.

Not to worry. As it turns out, production of farm-raised crawfish will not be 50 percent of last year's yield, as predicted, but more in the range of the 60 million pounds produced in 1989-90, when the farm value was $34 million. Better yet, higher prices on this year's fish (caused, in part, by demand) mean Louisiana crawfish farmers will earn more in the 1990-91 season than in the previous year.

They deserve it, too, said Dr. Robert Romaire, an aquaculture production biologist with LSU's Agricultural Center. "We needed a good crawfish season for our crawfish farmers," he said. "Not to worry. As it turns out, production of farm-raised crawfish will not be 50 percent of last year's yield, as predicted, but more in the range of the 60 million pounds produced in 1989-90, when the farm value was $34 million. Better yet, higher prices on this year's fish (caused, in part, by demand) mean Louisiana crawfish farmers will earn more in the 1990-91 season than in the previous year.

"We've had many seasons where crawfish farmers haven't done well, prices haven't been good, and some people have had to get out of the business."

Mark Shirley, a fisheries agent in Vermilion Parish, said the good news doesn't fall across-the-board, but most crawfish farmers there are indeed "happier." He added, "You can't say that everyone did real good. We saw some farmers that had a very poor crop and harvested little...and we have some that had a pretty good crop of large crawfish and did better than they did last year." The average Vermilion farmer "did as good or better than previous years," Shirley said.

Vermilion Parish had over 12,000 acres in crawfish ponds during the 1990-91 season, holding that Shirley said ranks it as the state's third largest producer of crawfish raised in rice field ponds. The two larger producers are Acadia and Evangeline parishes. Shirley said Lafayette, Iberia and St. Martin parishes also are big crawfish producers, using a combination of rice fields and managed swamp ponds.

Throughout the state, 125,000 to 135,000 acres are devoted to crawfish farms, with most of them located in southern and central Louisiana, according to Romaire. He said definite origins of this year's initial problems are still inconclusive. "In the past 10 years I've been working with crawfish, it's the first time I've seen it like this," he said, adding that farmers and fisheries experts were "mystified" when preliminary catches last November came up nil. He said the apparent lack of crawfish births last fall could have been caused by fish deaths or because females were too stressed to lay eggs.

Whatever the reason for losing the "early waves or recruitment," Romaire said the short-term withholding resulted in long-term gain. Warm fall and winter weather interfered with water quality by rotting vegetation, reducing oxygen, and increasing bacteria, but Romaire said the initial low fish rate provided a lot of water space and eggs.

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"Crawfish is still the number one fish farming industry in Louisiana," Romaire said. He added that catfish production recently surpassed crawfish, but that the latter farming employs more people - 5,000 or 6,000 workers such as farmers, trappers, bait salesmen and trap makers.

Most of those workers have closed the season for this year. Shirley said Vermilion farmers finished harvesting by the end of May, but Romaire said harvests are just now concluding in the Atchafalaya Basin, where "wild" crawfish grow in the naturally marshy region.

Because wild crawfish tend to be larger, they generally net a higher price, said Romaire, citing last year's average as 56 cents a pound, or 6 cents a pound more than the farm-raised average. About 30 million pounds of wild crawfish (about half the amount of farm-raised) were grown in 1989-90 with a farm value close to $17 million.

Higher prices on this year's fish mean Louisiana crawfish farmers will earn more in the 1990-91 season than in the previous year.

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November and December and get progressively better yields by spring. This year, though, farmers were "skeptical or really concerned" by springtime, he said. "We didn't see a good catch until sometime in March."

But then, Romaire said, "A lot of catching up was done. The later catches were excellent." He added that Louisiana crawfish farmers may have had the most profitable year they've had in close to a decade. "We think, in the final analysis, the farm-raised crop (in pounds) will be less, compared to last year, about 10 to 20 percent less, but think the overall income will certainly exceed last year's."

Crawfish prices last year averaged 50 cents a pound for farm-raised crawfish, but demand for crawfish by the past spring was so great that prices ranged from 70 cents to $1 per pound until mid-May when they dropped to 40-45 cents per pound. Another factor helping to raise prices is the grading system that began last year. Crawfish once sold by the sack now is separated into three sizes, with the largest going to the international market, mostly Sweden and deluxe restaurants, the mid-size also going to restaurants, and the smallest ones going to processing mills for peeling.

Romaire said the grading system was developed in relation to the international market, where about 5 percent of the state's crawfish go. About 70 percent of Louisiana's crawfish are sold and consumed in-state, with another 20 percent going to nearby states, and the remaining 5 percent going to other U.S. locations - mostly major metropolitan areas.

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