Crawfish production down 50%

Some blame freeze of '89, others dry weather last summer, fall

By The Associated Press

Crawfish farmers agree that this has been one of the poorest crawfish seasons ever — production is down about 50 percent statewide — but opinions are divided over the cause.

Perry Lavergne, president of the Louisiana Crawfish Fishermen's Association, said he believes the record freeze of December 1989 is at fault. "It wiped out a wave of crawfish that should have been our brood stock. The crawfish are still suffering this year," Lavergne, a New Iberia resident, said during a telephone interview.

Some farmers lost between 40 percent and 80 percent of their crop to the freeze, Lavergne said.

Robert Chiasson Jr. of Lockport watched his 450-acre pond's production drop to 80,000 pounds in 1990 from 787,500 pounds in 1989. "I lost all the feed, plus I had to beg people to buy my crawfish because they were all this big," Chiasson said, holding his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart.

"This year's production is even worse," he said. "This pond should be producing 2,000 pounds a day," Chiasson said. "I'm getting 200 . . . ."

But some farmers and several fisheries agents with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service said the freeze was not at fault. They say this season has been poor because of dry weather last summer and fall.

The drought hit during the five or six months the female crawfish are in the ground, bearing eggs, Lafourche Parish Fisheries Agent Alan Matherne said. There was no way farmers could keep the ground moist.

"It killed a lot of the crawfish in the ground, and those it didn't kill it hurt their reproductive cycle," Matherne said.

The result, said Mark Shirley, Vermilion Parish fisheries agent, was that farmers lost the first wave of recruitment.

This has been offset somewhat by higher prices, Shirley said. The buyers have already spent more money this year than they had at this time last year.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Sugar Cane Field Laboratory in Houma, only 23.81 inches of rain fell from June to November 1990. The average amount of rainfall for that period is 35.69 inches.

Dry weather wasn't the farmers' only problem, though. Last year diesel prices doubled. Crawfish farmers use diesel to fuel pumps that add oxygen to the water in their ponds.

The added fuel expense prevented some farmers from aerating their ponds as often as they normally would have, Terrebonne Parish Fisheries Agent Jerome Zeringue said.

Lavergne and Chiasson are pushing to get low-interest federal loans for crawfish farmers, the same loans that sugarcane, citrus and catfish farmers are eligible for because of the freeze.

They want the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service and the state Department of Agriculture to declare the season a disaster, because of the 1989 freeze.

"They helped the sugarcane people. They helped the citrus people. They helped the catfish people," Chiasson said. "Why can't they help the crawfish people?"

Willie Cooper, state director of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, said it is too late to use the 1989 freeze to have the season declared a disaster.

Information on the damage and the request from the governor to the U.S. secretary of agriculture must take place within 90 days of the disaster, Cooper said.

The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service office in Houma received no complaints, a spokeswoman said.

Zeringue said no crawfish farmers complained to him about the freeze. Matherne said he received only one complaint.

"The problem is just saying the freeze is a problem isn't good enough," Matherne said. "All the freeze might have done is kill the forage. You have to have proof."

Since the state does not require crawfish farmers to report their production, there is no way to tell exactly how much the harvest-size changes from year to year, Matherne said.

But Matherne said if farmers want to try and get the season declared a disaster because of the drought, he would be willing to work with them.