Crawfish production — off to slow start

Crawfish production is off to an extremely slow start this season, according to Randall S. Montegut, assistant area agent.

Crawfish ponds which usually account for early production (Nov.-Feb.) cannot come close to meeting the high price demand. Many ponds have not yet begun to produce and many that started producing in November and December have tapered off after catching the carry-over adults, the immature crawfish from last year and the early young of this year. Temperatures have been steadily cold during January and growth of this year’s young crawfish is very slow.

The major problem with most ponds is a shortage or lack of crawfish which are normally hatched out August through October. September was hot and dry, and this caused water quality problems (Low oxygen). Salt water in canals prevented some farmers from flushing fresh water through their ponds, others had pump sizes which cannot push enough aerated water through the ponds fast enough, and others just do not believe in pumping. In any case those who did pump had difficulty overcoming Mother Nature’s hot, dry conditions. We did not get enough rains to freshen our ponds. Knowing that hot water does not hold as much oxygen as cool water, and that decomposing grasses and other living things use more oxygen in warmer water, we can understand why we had poor survival of those early hatched crawfish. Those ponds that were flooded late started with better water and had less oxygen problems with the cooler water,” said Montegut.

“The drought which we experienced this summer and fall also caused the loss of some crawfish which cannot burrow as fast and deep as older adults. The problem was worst in high-land ponds where the water table dropped deeper and in ponds which had no aquatic vegetation to prevent quick-drying of the bottom and provide cover. I uncovered many chimneys only to find dead crawfish four to 12 inches deep. This was usually immature crawfish,” said Montegut.

“Ponds which are fished late (into the end of June) often start producing later in the fall. In some heavily fished ponds, I could find few mature crawfish during May and June. If there was a shortage of early maturing adults, we would not expect to get a large early hatch,” he said.

Montegut also noted that in many ponds there is still burrowing activity on the sides, and many crawfish are still in the ground. We usually see a smaller peak of spring reproduction in most established ponds and in new ponds which had natural populations before. These young should start showing up soon and provide for increased spring production.

The Basin, said Montegut, is really looking bad. It’s been so dry and the Mississippi and Atchafalaya River Systems have been so low that things would have to change drastically to get enough water in the Basin. Even if it got the water, I think it would be late and short at best, concluded Montegut.