Crawfish scarce; harvesters blame rainfall shortage

Prices expected to rise; supplies to remain low

By RANDY McCLAIN
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Crawfish might be a little lonely over the Christmas holidays this year.

Low rainfall since July has set the crawfish season back at least four weeks. Producers say that means there won't be many mudbugs for sale until at least mid-January, and prices will be high even then.

"Last year wasn't good, and I can assure you this year will be even worse," said Roy Robin, owner of Bayou Land Seafood near Henderson.

"We need some good 2-inch rains, some rain that counts," he said.

"I think we're going to have a very poor year," said Harold Benoit, chairman of the Louisiana Crawfish Promotion and Research Board.

"By December, we should be seeing signs of crawfish, but the little animals aren't crawling around. Something happened," Benoit said.

Agricultural experts say sparse rainfall between July and November slowed the birth of new crawfish and kept some momma mudbugs buried deep in their burrows waiting for signs that the state's drought had ended.

Usually crawfish are in ample supply by Christmas, but this year the schedule has been thrown off by rainfall levels less than half of normal.

"Every day that we don't have rain reduces the potential numbers of growing

Bayou Land Seafood plant manager Jeff Guidry, left, unloads some of the 21 sacks of crawfish that constituted the plant's entire intake of the popular crustacean Tuesday. Crawfishermen such as Russell Robin, right, usually busy this time of year, are getting a few mudbugs from ponds and nothing from the Atchafalaya Basin.

Advocate staff photos by Travis Spradling

Crawfish are few, puny and expensive so far this season. The mudbug on the left is a typical size for a normal December. The specimen on the right is the typical size so far this month, and there won't be many of those for another month. If they are lucky enough to find any, crawfish lovers can expect to pay more than $2 a pound.
creatures specialist with the LSU Agricultural Center.

Modest rainfall in some parts of southwest Louisiana last week may have helped some crawfish farmers working man-made ponds. But Benoit said the majority of pond farmers still haven’t seen crawfish in great numbers and the mudbugs they are harvesting are small and of poor quality.

Crawfish producers say conditions are also lousy in the Atchafalaya Basin, one of the best spots to trap wild crawfish.

Pond-grown crawfish make up about half of the state’s multi-million dollar crawfish crop and wild crawfish make up the other half.

“We’re three or four weeks behind where we were last year,” said Bill Pizzolato, who sells live and boiled crawfish at Tony’s Seafood on Plank Road.

He said low supplies will push consumer prices higher early in the season, which typically runs from December to mid May.

Lutz said crawfish production is a tricky business, and it can fluctuate a lot based on rain, how cold temperatures are and other factors.

Crawfish hibernate in burrows for months at a time, and the mothers usually lay up to 300 eggs in their burrows between August and November.

When water levels are moderate to high outside the burrow, the mother leaves the nest with tiny babies dangling from her tail. The eggs generally hatch in two or three weeks, and then the babies cling to momma’s tail another few weeks before they’re big enough to venture out on their own. A newborn crawfish goes from hatching to edible in six weeks.

Farmers who use nearby bayous as a water supply have also faced problems in recent weeks, Lutz said.

Low water levels have allowed salt-water intrusion into some bayous in southwest Louisiana — in Vermilion, Calcasieu, Cameron and Jefferson Davis parishes — and crawfish can’t live in water laced with more than trace amounts of salt.

Robin, who owns 280 acres of crawfish ponds near Henderson, said he’s selling live crawfish for $2 a pound and he thinks prices could go as high as $2.20 a pound unless supplies of mudbugs improve.

That’s well above the peak price of $1.75 a pound a year ago.

Rob in raises some of his own crawfish, but also buys from other ponds in Acadiana.

“Right now, we’re buying six or eight (40-pound) sacks a day,” he said. “Usually at this time we’re buying 3,000 or 4,000 pounds a day.”

Rainfall totaled only 11 inches in southwest Louisiana this year during the crucial months of July through November, officials said, down from a 50-year average of 25 inches.

Dry weather reduces the amount of vegetation needed to support crawfish in the wild. And water is also needed to help produce a kind of glue on a female’s tail that allows eggs to stick there and develop normally, Lutz said.

No rain also means crawfish might remain in their burrows with their young too long.

“The mothers are good at protecting their babies. But, if they are trapped in the burrow too long with little food, the mother will eat her babies,” Lutz said.

Lutz said crawfish thrive best in burrows that allow water to seep in but not flood.

“Crawfish like air in the top part of the burrow and water in the bottom few inches, so they can dip down in the water and then crawl back up into the air,” he said.