OPELOUSAS - As the crawfish season enters its final months, pond fishermen are seeing an increase in the number and quality of the crustaceans, an expert said Friday.

Dwight Landreneau, aquaculture agent for the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, says the number of crawfish caught in the state's ponds is beginning to increase.

"The pond season is basically at its peak now," Landreneau said. "And, while not everybody is satisfied, I think it's beginning to pick up."

The season, which begins in mid-November, lasts until May for pond crawfish and through August for crawfish caught in the Atchafalaya Basin.

Landreneau estimates that there are between 1,600 and 2,000 crawfish producers in the state, running between 15,000 and 200,000 acres of ponds. Most of those ponds are in the southwest portion of the state, he said.

The quality of the crawfish caught now, no matter who you talk to, is "excellent," Landreneau said. "The farmers who tried to follow the recommended practices seem to be doing better," Landreneau said.

"Those who are manipulating the water and oxygen levels and keeping the feed in the traps," Landreneau said. "But overall, the numbers still are down from last year, he said."

"We had a perfect growing season, so I'm not sure why they didn't pick up and grow," Landreneau said. "But we do have some overpopulation in some ponds."

"The crawfish are still too little to stay in the traps."

A new size-grading system implemented last fall is "really taking off," Landreneau said.

"The grading system is working because people know to ask for graded, washed crawfish and are willing to pay a premium price in order to be sure they will get the type of seafood they want," Landreneau said.

The crawfish coming out of the ponds now are medium to medium-large, he said.

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