The USL Crawfish Research Center recently conducted a study, in collaboration with the National Wetlands Research Center, on the effects of waterbirds on crawfish and rice crops in Louisiana.

The results of the research were presented Feb. 5 to the American Fisheries Society in Baton Rouge.

The report, titled “Coots, Crawfish, and Rice: Preliminary Observations in Southern Louisiana,” was co-authored by Clinton Jeske of the National Wetlands Research Center, and Jay Huner and Billy Leonard, both of the USL Crawfish Research Center.

For two years, researchers studied the effects of waterbirds on rice and crawfish crops.

“A waterbird is any bird that is closely associated with water, including egrets, gulls, swans, ducks, geese, pelicans and coots,” Huner explained.

The study, funded by the Louisiana Crawfish Promotion and Research Board, found that coots, also known as water chickens, were the primary culprits of crop damage.

Huner explained that coots have been a problem in crawfish ponds for years, due to declining wetlands, and that the ponds make an excellent artificial habitat.

“We lose 20,000 acres of coastal wetlands each year. These are not being replaced. It is logical, then, to find the birds using our agricultural wetlands, especially the crawfish/rice systems,” he said.

As many as 1,000 of the birds were found in 30-acre ponds by the farmers, according to the report.

“Farmers believe that the coots are competing for food with crawfish and eating crawfish,” Huner said.

Though coots attack crawfish, their primary sources of food are vegetation and seeds; naturally, “they leave the crawfish ponds and destroy newly planted rice in adjacent rice fields,” he stated.

Consequently, consumers are faced with higher prices on rice and crawfish, while farmers must deal with fewer profits.

One purpose of the report, according to Huner, is to figure out a solution to the crop problem, without causing harm to the waterbirds.

“Many people come to Louisiana to see our wildlife, especially (to see) the birds. Our research team wants to insure that bird populations remain healthy and (we are) optimistic that we can turn the birds into economic assets through nature-based tourism and wildlife habitat projects.”

Currently, the Crawfish Research Center is teaming up with the LSU Agricultural Center and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services Agency to create projects for the development of solutions to the crop dilemma.

One of these solutions “will involve the development of a computer simulation model where we can predict damage in advance based on real research data,” Huner explained.

The report is a vital first step in addressing the problems that crawfish and rice farmers have had to contend with for years.