Crawfishermen urged to boycott permit plan

By MARY BROUSSARD
Westside bureau

BAYOU PIGEON — A Baton Rouge attorney on Friday urged crawfishermen to boycott a new permit program that would require them to pay $200 a year to trap crawfish on private land in the Atchafalaya Basin.

Attorney John Aydell told 250-300 fishermen at a membership meeting of Common Claws that unity would aid the effort.

Common Claws, a non-profit group, is recruiting members in an attempt to fight the permit program initiated by a Patterson-based association of landowners that wants to charge commercial and recreational fishermen for the right to trap crawfish on 80,000 acres of private land in Iberville, St. Martin and Iberia Parishes. The group also hopes to serve as a lobbyist for the crawfish industry in the state legislature.

By the end of Friday’s meeting, about 150 fishermen had joined Common Claws.

“It’s never been done, but we need to stick together,” Claws President Charlie Davis said. “That’s the only chance we have of winning,” Co-President Kenny Landry agreed.

The Atchafalaya Crawfish Conservation Association said it will begin monitoring the property next week. The association, which has leases from 15 unnamed landowners, maintains the permit program was started to conserve the crawfish resource and act as a collective voice for fishermen.

At the same time Claws is recruiting members, a survey is being circulated in several parishes to determine the population of the permit program. Davis, who started the survey, said he has 1,600 names and only two of those are in favor of the program. He said he is continuing to gather names and opinions.

Aydell refused to discuss any strategy with the fishermen, but said it was not decided in state, not federal, court.

Unarmed guards are expected to patrol the private land and ask each

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fisherman without a permit to leave, Aydell said. Aydell told crawfishermen they would have to decide for themselves whether to leave if requested.

Part of the land the association is regulating is in Iberive Parish, but the bulk is in Iberia and St. Martin parishes.

The designated property is bordered by upper Bayou Sorrel to the north, Six Mile and Flat lakes to the south and the two guide levees of the Atchafalaya Basin to the east and west.

One man attending the meeting said the matter boils down to which way the courts will rule. He says he fears that if crawfishermen give in, then fishermen and bird-watchers will be denied access to the floodway.

A man who has a lease in St. James Parish said, “It’s hell.” He said fishermen are told how and when to fish and to whom to sell their catch.

“You lose all total freedom,” he said.

Oswald Broussard, president of the Louisiana Crawfish Producers Association in St. Martin Parish, said he had been studying a similar situation on the west side of the basin for the past eight years.

Broussard questioned if the permit fee would lead to a tax. He also questioned if the landowners association had any liability insurance and predicted that within three years

fishermen would be splitting their catch with the association.

Under the permit guidelines laid out by the landowners association, fishermen must use certain-sized nets and drop nets on private property could land in jail.

Earlier this week, the Iberia Parish Police Jury began procedures to approve an ordinance allowing “fishing and crawfishing” on flooded lands in that parish. The ordinance is patterned after a similar law in St. Martin Parish.

Melinda Landry accepts membership fees to Common Claws from crawfishermen attending a meeting at Joan of Arc Catholic Church in Bayou Pigeon Friday night. The money will be used to pay attorney fees in the crawfishermen’s efforts to fight a permit program initiated by a group of landowners in the Atchafalaya Basin.