Crawfishermen vote not to buy $200 permits

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BAYOU PIGEON — A majority of the members of an organization of crawfishermen on Saturday voted to refrain from buying $200 permits to trap on private property in the Atchafalaya Basin.

About 100 members of Common CLAWS Inc. attended a jambalaya dinner and informal meeting at the St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church gymnasium.

“We're going to keep boycotting the permits as we're doing now,” Common CLAWS treasurer Kenny Landry said.

Common CLAWS will contact the Atchafalaya Crawfish Conservation Association and inform its officials of the latest decision, Landry said. The crawfishermen decided to continue keeping a low profile in the controversy.

The Patterson-based association met with crawfishermen in January and unveiled the annual permit fee. Purchase of the permit would allow a recreational or commercial crawfisherman to trap crustaceans on 80,000 designated acres in Iberville, Iberia and St. Martin parishes.

The association, which has leases from 15 unnamed land owners in the basin south of I-10, wants to control access to the property, which is flooded during crawfish season.

The association contends it wants to help the crawfishing industry by setting a crawfish season in conserving the resource. The association also wants to act as a representative for crawfishermen with state and federal governments.

So far no one has purchased permits. Association officials attribute the lack of interest in the permits to the poor crawfish season in the basin.

Landry said he was unhappy that only a third of the Common CLAWS membership showed up Saturday night. However, the board of directors will continue trying to find a compromise with the association.

Common CLAWS attorney John Aydeli of Baton Rouge said he hoped both parties could reach an agreement.

“I think it could prove beneficial if a long-term lease was reached whereby an affordable price (was established) without the crawfisherme having to yield a percentage of their catch,” he said. “However, on the other hand, the wishes of the majority of the organization must be respected. We will continue to attempt to find a solution satisfactory to all.”

A major concern of crawfishermen is that the association will demand a percentage of their catch, similar to sharecropping.

Some of the other choices crawfishermen discussed were subleasing land from the association or going directly to landowners to lease the land or agreeing with the association to pay a permit fee and gradually increase it each year.

Some of the members attending Saturday night's meeting showed pessimism toward the crawfishermen's plight. One man said he paid his money to join the organization but felt the poor crawfishermen could not fight the wealthy landowners. He said he felt doomed.

Common CLAWS member Louis Kelly opposed the man's views.

“Well, if I felt that way, I wouldn't be here tonight,” Kelly said.