Crawfishermen in Basin set up new cooperative

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HENDERSON — Still feeling the pinch from last season's low prices and a two-week "fish-out" that temporarily stalled crawfish harvesting, many crawfishermen in this area of the Atchafalaya Basin are watching with interest the development of a fishermen's cooperative.

In May of this year, hundreds of basin fishermen banded in their traps and joined in a basinwide ban on crawfishing to protest low prices being paid for the popular mudbugs. During the height of the season, which extends from the early spring through June and normally peaks during May, many crawfish buyers were paying as low as 30 cents and 25 cents a pound. Crawfishermen claimed they needed a minimum of 35 cents a pound to see even a slight profit or, in some cases, to break even.

In addition to the "fish-out" or ban on fishing, which temporarily did promote the raising of prices to the 35-cent range, many crawfishermen joined organizations such as the Louisiana Crawfish Producers Association and expressed support for the formation of a fishermen's cooperative.

After months of discussions and planning, the Acadiana Fishermen's Cooperative has been established for the west side of the basin, which includes the Henderson and Catahoula areas.

Greg Guirard of Catahoula, a spokesman for the cooperative, said the group currently has 48 members, with two openings left for the 50-member limit.

Membership is open to any full-time fisherman or pond owner, according to Guirard, and each member purchases one share of cooperative stock and is entitled to one vote on cooperative-related matters. No member can own more than a single share of stock, he added.

A board of directors has been appointed, rules and a charter adopted, and officers elected, Dupuis said. Also, the cooperative has a lease-purchase agreement with Amy's processing plant in Henderson, and a second agreement with another plant in Henderson in the final stages of being signed, Guirard said.

Amy's is in operation and is being managed by Earl Dupuis. The entire plant is available only to cooperative members, as will be the second plant, Guirard stressed.

"Right now we can't have more than 50 members because during the season when the basin is really producing crawfish, the plants won't be able to handle the haul from more than 50 fishermen," Guirard said. "When we get 25 to 30 more fishermen interested in joining, we'll open another plant on the west side of the basin."

Floyd Blanchard, president of the cooperative, said reaction to the opening of a two-plant cooperative has been mixed thus far.

"People are curious to see if it's going to work," Blanchard told the Advocate. "There's no real negative reaction right now, but we are dealing with the idea that it won't work. It's really too early to tell, but once the crawfish season gets started next year we should have an idea if it'll work out."

The purpose of the co-op is to give the fishermen an opportunity through the organization to own the processing plants, to participate in the processing of their seafood products, and to provide them with buying services and a variety of supplies, Guirard said.

He warned, however, that the co-op, through its processing plants, will not guarantee members high prices for their products. The co-op will have to be competitive with other buyers and processors, but should "provide some leverage where prices are concerned," Guirard said.

"We felt we needed a co-op now after the strikes earlier this year," Guirard said. "It's time for the fishermen to start — past time — seeing the fruits of their labor. Anybody that works that hard should be able to make a decent living.

"The co-op isn't your basic profit-making operation, but the members do benefit from profit-sharing. All of the profits from selling bait, fuel, trap wire and other supplies will go to the co-op, and at the end of the year the members will share in the profits.

"Through the co-op, the crawfishermen will be the middlemen. The crawfishermen — any fishermen — have become the buyer, seller and processor. It'll be competitive, but the biggest advantage is all profits will go back to the fishermen."

The processing plants will be in operation year-round, Guirard said, and plans currently are being made to build a large freezer at the second Henderson plant, Fishermen's Pier.

Craw processing is under way at Amy's, according to Dupuis. A member of a long-time fishing and processing family from the Henderson area, Dupuis said he supports the idea of a cooperative and "I'm glad to be a part of this one."

Some 60 to 70 women are employed at the plant, along with several men, and are involved in the processing of crabs and "a few crawfish that are coming in," Dupuis said. "We do all the cooking and processing right here," the manager said. "Right now the prices aren't real good for crab meat, especially lump meat, and we've got a lot of competition from the coast, from Lake Pontchartrain all the way over to Texas."

The bulk of the plant's business will come from crawfishermen, and business "will pick up later this month when the crawfish season kicks in," Dupuis said. "It'll really pick up when the basin fishing starts around February."

In addition to managing the plant, Dupuis is responsible for reporting back to the co-op's board of directors any suggestions. He said he intends to promote the idea that the co-op first, and foremost, is a business and will be competitive in the market.

"This is really a good business, and the idea of a co-op is good," Dupuis said. "But these fishermen have got to realize they're businessmen now, and they've got to understand the law of supply and demand.

"I'm going to make sure we're competitive and we have the best market for the fishermen and they get the best price — as long as it's competitive. We're going to have bills to pay just like any other company, but the fishermen should be able to sell what they catch and make money."

Dupuis and Guirard, along with many crawfishermen, support recent legislation that will require in 1986 the usage of three-quarter-inch mesh wire on all crawfish traps. The legislation was passed to promote the harvesting of larger, quality crawfish, but did meet with some opposition from crawfishermen who said it will cut down on their yields.

"More isn't necessarily better," Dupuis said. "It's like right now I'm getting in crawfish and the quality's just not there. Poor quality hurts more than having a glut of crawfish during the season.

"That's one reason I believe a season should be established — to push quality. Let the basin season run from February through the end of June for crawfish, and then the crabs can come in. Crawfish will be back with ponds by November, and that'll peak out when the basin comes in. And having a season gives the basin a chance to recover; it's like the purpose of any season, like shrimping."

The establishment of co-ops will not only unite fishermen, but will provide an outlet for economic support and increased business opportunities, according to Guirard and Dupuis.

"It remains to be seen if the westside co-op will succeed, "but if it does, it could be an economic boom for the state," Dupuis said. "The state doesn't even realize what a great industry this is, so maybe co-ops can get things rolling. After what we went through earlier this year and for so many years before, it's time to try this."