Crawfishing: No longer just a winter pastime
LaHayes exemplify trend toward premium crop, top quality management

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Editor

When Richard LaHaye tips the control flap and powers up the paddlewheel aerator mounted on a pole next to Evangeline Parish's Highway 19, the first thing he and his wife, Cindy, do is to set the timer and shuck the fingers of crawfish propelled skyward by the blades of their paddlewheel aerator. Would you like to see them? Cindy LaHaye calls to her husband and Dwight Landreneau, her cousin, joined the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service aquaculture agent, as they check the crawfish on a baby December morning.

The paddlewheel aerator—which Richard LaHaye admits has prompted some questions by curious farmers who pass his fields below, the permanent crawfish pond—is a definite sign that this crawfish farming operation is stepping up its production goals and establishing the permanent crawfish pond—was a definite sign that this crawfish farming continued its market to a premium grade, reports Cindy.

Landing comfortably along the wood-topped kitchen island in the LaHayes' home adjacent to the crawfish pond, Cindy LaHaye readily admits their interest in cheese began when they harvested their rice to cash flow and creating a winter pastime.

"But, that move, made in 1986, has expanded to the point that Dwight and I installed a computer system to keep track of our frozen crawfish," reflects Cindy. "That's how the LaHayes are in the vanguard of Louisiana farmers who consider their ice cream a commodity, and are paying closer attention to the research being developed by the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service and the Crowley Rice Research Station."

"I started in a pasture," says Richard of his first move into crawfishing. "I did that one year, and then I started raising crawfish and rice the next year."

"In 1988, that's when I decided I'd like to do it," says the 33-year-old farmer. "Because we had a good year in 1987, I thought it was the catch.

"The LaHayes didn't hesitate after that. When they started working with Dwight, they started raising the pond by hand and purchased the paddlewheel aerator."

"When Richard started, he were kind of in the forefront here," remembers Landreneau. "At that time, crawfish were moving to the market."

"When we started grading, 50 percent of our catch was a single-sized crawfish," interjects Cindy. "And I think we were having to sell them for peeling for meal, which, at the time, was about 30 cents a pound."

The LaHayes quickly moved into the market by installing a paddlewheel aerator in the pond to establish high standards for quality crawfish, which means 90 to 95 percent of Louisiana exported crawfish will be sold to restaurants and customers willing to pay a premium price for the washed and graded crawfish. The market also formulated a price structure, distinguishing between peeled, the restaurant retail market, and frozen crawfish export market, where 90 to 95 percent of Louisiana exported crawfish will be sold in Canada.

Richard LaHaye comments, "We were buying mostly regular crawfish, and we couldn't sell them. It was a premium crawfish market."

"The crawfish we sell are not treatment, health and eating waters, says Landreneau, "We've always done that, set up our market beforehand."

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