Seafood consumers can look forward to new crawfish delicacy

Louisiana's 105,000 acres of commercial crawfish ponds may, in the not-too distant future, produce an additional delicacy for seafood consumers: the soft shelled crawfish.

These soft crustaceans are typically found in ponds already; the challenge currently facing LSU's aquaculture researchers is finding a practical way of raising and marketing them.

Dr. Dudley Culley of LSU's School of Wildlife and Fisheries, who leads the soft crawfish project, says the key to successful farming is learning how to identify crawfish that are about to molt, then culturing the animals at a high density with an intensive feeding program.

"The soft shelled crawfish is an immature crawfish that has just lost its old shell in order to grow. Underneath the old hard shell is a soft shell that will harden and enlarge as the animal begins to grow again," Culley said. "Before this new shell starts to grow and harden, the animals must be harvested."

The soft crawfish Culley and his research team are using in their work are captured during routine harvests from the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station ponds at Ben Hur Farm. The newly-molted specimens are taken from the traps, packed loosely and put into cold storage. Crawfish near the molting stage are put into a culture system to accelerate their development.

"Different coloration patterns on the crawfish help us to recognize those in the early premolt stage," Culley said. "Those we put in water-filled holding trays and within 24 to 48 hours, they shed their old shells."

"It's a fairly straightforward production process once the animals are removed from the pond traps," Culley said. "Extra care must be given in the harvest however, because molting crawfish are sensitive to high temperatures and low oxygen levels."

The normal season for soft crawfish production runs, not surprisingly, concurrent with the crawfishing season, according to Culley, who says as long as the crawfish are still growing in the ponds, there are candidates for the soft shelled crawfish culture system. Once they reach maturity, however, they don't molt enough to justify keeping them in the system, he said.

But what about the market potential for this "new" dish? Researchers admit they don't have the data to predict its success yet.

"We of course currently have no real soft shelled crawfish industry in the state -- we have one man I know of who harvests and sells them in the Baton Rouge area -- and we'd need some small scale commercial operations out there working to find out if the industry's going to pan out."

There is definitely a demand to this state, we just don't know how big. We don't have a way to measure it yet. Crawfish is a South Louisiana tradition, and another crawfish dish should expect a good reception," he said. "We're basically working on a means of getting the supply to the market."

EWE education plan in serious trouble

By ADVERTISER
Capital Bureau

BATON ROUGE -- By most legislators' assessments, Gov. Edwin Edwards' education package is in serious trouble.

And at a press conference yesterday, Edwards agreed it is "in danger."

The biggest problem most lawmakers have with the governor's plan is money. Cost estimates are in the $200 million range and with a budget that could be as much as $200 million in the red even without the fiscal year. The governor has ordered cuts any time package, many say there is no way to fund it without crippling many other state programs.

"We are in danger of not passing an effective education package," Edwards said yesterday. "We are not in danger of passing a budget that is out of balance."

Edwards has told legislators that he is not concerned about the budget. The House Appropriations Committee has spent hours poring over amendments to cut the budget but Edwards told members this week that now is not the time to worry about it.

"The constitution doesn't require adopting a balanced budget," he said, and all that is required is that it is in balance at the end of the fiscal year. The governor has the authority to order cuts any time during the year when the budget appears to be in trouble.

Edwards earlier urged the committee to make cuts but refused to give it any suggestions on what to cut.

The governor said he and the Legislature have come to a "standoff of sorts" due to "either my stupidity in not seeing my wisdom." The constitutional amendment creates a "final safeguard against my irresponsible appointment." Edwards said he favors requiring recertification of teachers but when Lafayette Rep. Mike Thompson tried to amend that into an administration bill this week, Edwards' floor leaders campaigned against it and got the amendment tabled.

"I support the recertification amendment but I don't think it is going to get the necessary votes to pass," he said yesterday. "I told them to work out a compromise."

Thompson said he was invited to a meeting at the mansion this week to talk to Edwards about it but when he got there, Edwards sided with teacher union members. Thompson excused himself and told Edwards "I must be at the wrong meeting."