Firm to build second crawfish processing plant in Mexico

By CHERYL PAPA
Advocate correspondent

NEW IBERIA — Representatives of American Seafood Inc. announced Wednesday that a second plant for processing crawfish will be built in Mexico, and they defended their current Mexican processing plant.

The purpose of the press conference, held at the company’s local plant site at Acadia Regional Airport, was “to dispel the myths and inaccuracies” that have surfaced as a result of the Mexican operation, said Anders Sundquist, president of the company.

People are uninformed about the Mexican processing, which has caused the operation to be blown out of proportion, said Sundquist. There have been complaints in this area that the Mexican operation is taking jobs away from local people who might otherwise peel the crawfish at the company’s plant here.

Despite the controversy surrounding the Mexican plant, a second plant will be open by next crawfish season, said Richard Dunham, a stockholder in the company.

Because the local industry is lacking peelers, it’s just a matter of time before someone else builds a plant in Mexico, he said.

“We would like to offer our services to other plants and people throughout the state,” Dunham said. “Any way we can be of help to fishermen, farmers and other processors, please let us know.”

The number of people that the new plant will employ will depend on the demand of American Seafood’s services, he said.

The company began sending crawfish to Mexico for peeling and packaging on Feb. 12 to stay in business, Sundquist said.

American Seafood was built to pack large crawfish for the Swedish export market, but during the last crawfish season the majority of the crawfish being harvested was either peeling size or medium size. Something had to be done with the remainder of the crawfish, so the Mexican operation was started.

While the medium-size crawfish are sold on the local live market, the smaller ones are peeled in Mexico and sold as feed meat, he said.

By building the plant in Mexico, American Seafood can offer a quality product at a competitive price, said Sundquist.

Mexican workers make about $6.50 per day. That amount includes direct wages and government benefits, said George Pevorth, who runs the Mexican operation.

Mexican workers make about $1.18 per pound, and peel anywhere from 15 to 45 pounds per day, said Jim Rich of Catfish Wholesale.

Iberia Parish President Craig Romero said that because Louisiana is trying to diversify, American Seafood is an asset to the parish.

The idea of diversification is “in the truest sense,” he said.

The company has been treated unfairly and all of the negatives it has received, said Romero.

Roy Holleman, president of the Iberia Parish Chamber of Commerce, said it is a shame that state Rep. Dale Sittig is trying to push legislation against American Seafood’s Mexican operation.

He referred to Sittig, who was not present at the press conference, as “ignorant” and his legislation as “stupid.”

“How short-sighted are our lawmakers and the people that are going around trying to kill American Seafood, when it is actually helping the area?” Holleman said.

He added that Sittig must not have done enough research on the operation.

In response to Holleman’s comments, Sittig later said in a phone interview that he introduced a resolution at the special session in February asking the Louisiana congressional delegation to study the Mexican peeling process.

“My concern is that jobs will be taken away from Louisiana,” Sittig said.

But processors at the press conference said they could not find enough people interested in peeling because of an internal Revenue Service audit, which may affect the status of seafood plant workers from contract laborers to employees, Sittig, though, maintained that jobs might be affected.

For being in the heart of crawfish processing plants, I have never heard processors say they could not find peelers,” he said.

He added that he doesn’t like to offer American Seafood’s side of the story.

“Before he (Holleman) attacked me, he could have at least offered his side to me,” Sittig said.

The Mexican operation was not developed to hurt anyone, said Sundquist, and it will help the crawfish industry expand.

Sundquist also maintained that the Mexican plant has passed all of the requirements set by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Quality Control Manager Mark Lassagne said the same structure used at the New Iberia location is used at the Mexican plant.

The structure includes personal training, lab procedures and comprehensive sanitation program.