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GRAND CHENIER — Wild alligators have used survival techniques honed since prehistoric times to claw their way back from a three-year drought that began to snap in the final weeks of 2000.

Egg production was down by 50 percent or more in many areas at this time last year, but female alligators have made full use of the return of normal rainfall patterns over the past 10 months, state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries biologist Ruth Elsey of Rockefeller Refuge said.

"Alligators are very adaptable creatures, obviously, since they have survived virtually unchanged for many thousands of years, and egg production is just about back to pre-drought levels," she said this week on the opening day of the monthlong wild harvest.

Throughout Acadiana’s coastal zone from the Atchafalaya River delta in St. Mary Parish to the mouth of the Mermen-tau River near Cameron, female alligators have been building their distinctive, dome-shaped nests and laying their annual clutch of eggs.

Elsey said the hunting season is designed to coincide with nesting season, when females are far back in the marsh guarding their clutch and males are cruising the canals and other accessible areas where hunters set their hooks. Protecting the females helps ensure the survival of the species, she said.

On Friday at Wayne Sagrera’s Vermilion Gator Farm in Mouton Cove, workers began a third day of measuring, weighing and skinning the catch hauled in by dozens of hunters.

Kyle Boudreaux and Shane Verret of St. Martinville, Richard Robin and Ronnie Courville of Henderson and Kenneth and Luther Vicknair of Catahoula worked quickly with their bone-handled knives, notching and stripping the valuable hides that will become shoes, purses, belts, luggage and other merchandise.

They used a high-pressure air hose inserted under the skin to pop the hide out tight like inflating an air mattress.

"It separates the meat from the hide and makes them much easier to skin," Craig Sagrera said.

Elsey said state statistics show nearly 300,000 eggs are collected by alligator farmers each year in a program that requires them to return 17 percent of the farm-raised gators to the wild when the juveniles reach a length of 3 feet to 5 feet.

It is called a ranching program because alligators do not lay eggs in captivity, but in the wild, where about one of every six farm-raised animals is returned to help ensure continued healthy populations.

“One of the important aspects of this program is its benefit as an economic incentive for private landowners to maintain and manage their wetlands,” Wayne Sagrera said.

“It’s an effective conservation tool that also impacts resources like waterfowl, fur, seafood production, storm protection and many other environmental benefits,” he said.

A common public misperception that persists despite educational programs and mounds of evidence to the contrary “is that these animals are somehow endangered or threatened,” Elsey said. “They are not. Alligators are a renewable, sustainable resource with proper management.”