Good wetlands management needed, officials say.

By JOE GYAN JR. Advocate staff writer

NEW ORLEANS — Louisiana must continue employing sound management strategies in its wetlands and estuaries to protect and preserve the Bayou State’s lucrative seafood industry, the state’s seafood managers said during about 250 seafood experts Thursday.

Virginia Van Sickle, secretary of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, said during the fourth annual Seafood Export Conference that Louisiana’s four most important commercial fisheries — shrimp, oysters, crawfish and crabs — depend heavily upon the state’s bays and estuaries.

With the state’s coastlines, most of the fishery’s spawners in the Gulf of Mexico. The young fish migrate into the bays and estuaries to mature and then return offshore to continue the life cycle.

The reason for the abundance of our fisheries is very easily explained by the ecologists and the fisheries biologists as being directly related to our wetlands and our estuaries,” Van Sickle told conference participants at the Hotel Le Meridien in New Orleans.

“There’s a well-documented relationship between the dependance of our fisheries on wetlands and estuarine waters,” she said. “We’re reconnected to that, and the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is getting more involved in standing up for protection of our wetlands and our coastal zone.”

Menhaden, an oily, shad-like fish, accounts for 79 percent of the commercial fish landings in Louisiana, Van Sickle said. Two billion pounds was harvested last year alone, she said.

Louisiana’s shrimp industry is the state’s most valuable fishery with its $200 million annual take. Roughly 80 million to 110 million pounds of shrimp is landed annually, she said.

Shrimp, like menhaden, spawn in the Gulf, and their larvae migrate into the state’s estuaries and bays to mature before returning offshore, Van Sickle said.

Louisiana’s oyster fishery is 100 percent dependent on a mixture of fresh and salt water for its survival, she said, calling the industry a “farmer’s operation.”

“Seed oysters are gathered from water of very low salinity, and then the oysters are transplanted to reefs where the oysters grow fast and live in a more saline environment,” Van Sickle said. Louisiana ranks No. 1 in the United States in terms of the volume of seafood produced and harvested each year, she said.

An increase in the quantity of new species, including chokka, or “herring,” Spanish sardines, blackfin tuna, squid, shark and mullet, can be expected, Van Sickle said.

The National Marine Fisheries Service estimates that Louisiana can harvest an additional one million to five million metric tons of underutilized species annually, she said.

“While we’re cautious, however, that the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries will not allow those fisheries to be overharvested,” Van Sickle said. “Fortunately, we have the promoters of the seafood industry in the same department as the managers of the seafood industry, so there’s a lot of discussion amongst them.”

Van Sickle said, “We’re not going to be promoting fish that ultimately could be damaged.”

Wildlife and Fisheries officials learned a vital lesson from the recent red snapper harvesting problem, Van Sickle said.

“Our staff has decided that we need to go forward with some more progressive fishery management plans such as the federal government does in the offshore area. We’re going to deal with the right kinds of government agencies, and we’re going to deal with the ones that are most threatened, and I believe the first one they’re looking at is black drum,” she said.

Van Sickle’s message will continue, Van Sickle said, but sound management plans must be in place.

“Sound fishery management benefits not only the commercial fishermen and the recreational fishermen, but it also helps stabilize the supply and stabilize the market,” she said.