Crawfish production and harvesting is a major business in Louisiana. But it could be bigger, according to one industry analyst. About $50 million of crawfish are harvested in the state, and all but 15% of the production is consumed in the state.

"It is a classic case of not taking advantage of a natural resource to develop national and international markets effectively," in the view of Edward F. Morrison, of the development firm of Morrison & Company.

Writing in the Spring 1990 issue of Business Louisiana, he notes that, "Mississippi had the same problem with catfish, but now you can buy catfish filets in Boston. If Mississippi can market the lowly catfish, why can't Louisiana meet the challenge of building a successful international crawfish industry?"

Part of the reason, he says, is because of nagging technical problems. He notes that researchers have made "significant progress" in increasing production from crawfish ponds through improved trap designs, sound water management and better forage.

"But," he writes, "crawfish are still harvested using wire traps. And that is time-consuming and expensive."

Over the past decade several inventors have claimed patents for automated harvesting devices. One approach, developed at LSU, used a modified irrigator to carry a system that would dump, bait and reset traps. But it was too costly to be useful.

Other inventors have relied on a self-propelled harvester, like a boat or mud buggy, but the prototypes have had limited success because of mechanical problems.

"The key to automated harvesting," in Morrison's view, "is building a reliable harvester. It doesn't have to be much to beat trapping. But a mechanical harvester has to keep on working. If it is not operating 80% or 90% of the time it is in the pond, you can't justify the investment."

And, he points out, the automated harvesters have not been cheap to build or to purchase.

Researchers have tried for years to get an adequate research budget for mechanical harvesting, but have not been able to do so.

"You'd think that private investors might be interested," he writes, "but there is a bigger problem. Developing a successful automated harvester involves more than simply building a prototype. For private investors to be interested, they need to know how they will get their money back."

"In addition to solving technical problems, you need to define the business," he continues. "Solving the problems of business strategy requires management judgment. For example, how will an automated harvester be introduced in the marketplace? How should it be priced? Should special financing be available?"

These issues, he says, "touch a core problem of commercializing new technology. A lot of questions are unanswered. Risks are high. Private investors - who need a clear exit - are not willing to shoulder the burden or risk alone."

Morrison suggests that one solution would be to establish a public-private development corporation for the crawfish industry.

"This corporation would assess the state of harvesting technology, oversee the construction of a model harvester, and define a business strategy to commercialize the technology. The cost of such an effort - about $100,000 a year - would be modest, compared to the potential payoff to the state."

He estimates that the harvester market in Louisiana is between $20 million and $30 million. And that market will expand as additional crawfish acreage is brought into production.

"In addition, if crawfish production is more productive," he says, "the industry can develop into value-added, downstream markets. And then there are foreign markets to consider."

"It's time for the legislature to consider setting up a crawfish development corporation," Morrison argues. "Fund it with a modest amount of seed money. Require some private matching money... Set a time limit of three years on its activities. Put it under the current board of the Louisiana Economic Development Corporation. Alternatively, a parishwide development group, like the Lafayette Economic Development Authority (LEDA), could take the lead."

"Setting up public-private partnership for the crawfish industry is the best way for Louisiana not to lose out on the potential of this promising national and international business," Morrison says.