High water may put limit on La. seafood

BY AMY WOLD
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The large amount of fresh water pouring down the Mississippi and Atchafalaya rivers could cause another hit to shrimp and oyster producers — who were largely shut down last year after the Deepwater Horizon oil leak.

For this brown shrimp season, colder weather and fresh water have hampered shrimp growth, said Harlon Pearce, owner of Harlon’s LA Fish, and chairman of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board.

Brown shrimp don’t like fresh water — so the shrimp being caught are running small, he said.

After last year’s oil leak closures, Pearce said, fishermen were looking forward to the spring season as a new start.

The good news, he said, is that white shrimp — a season later in the year — like fresh water, so there could be a good crop this year.

For oysters, the additional fresh water isn’t good news.

“The oyster was the one fisheries that was hurt the worst during the oil leak, not because of the oil, but because of the diversions,” Pearce said.

During the oil spill, many of the freshwater diversions along the Mississippi River were opened in an effort to push oil away from the coastline. Oysters can die if they’re exposed to too much fresh water.

“It couldn’t come at a worse time. We really needed inventory,” Pearce said.

If Louisiana seafood isn’t available, restaurants will need to look elsewhere for their supply, and it will take a lot of work to get Louisiana seafood back on that table, he said.

Rusty Gaudet, area fishery agent with the Louisiana Sea Grant Program covering Jefferson, St. Charles, St. John and Orleans parishes, said any change to the environment is going to bring change to the fisheries.

Indeed, he said, they are still trying to get a better idea of what impact last year’s diversions had on various fisheries.

“What was there an impact? Absolutely. But how bad was it?” he said. “What the impact is going to be from the Bonnet Carre or the Morganza (spillways), I don’t know how to help with that. Like with the BP spill, we just don’t know.”

Mike Voisin, owner of Motivat Seafoods Inc. and a member of the Louisiana Oyster Task Force, said the industry will survive, but the high water could put some smaller oyster farmers out of business.

During the water diversions last year, there were significant oyster mortalities — and production was only about 25 percent of the normal 250 million in shell pounds produced in the state, he said.

This year, it’s expected that about 50 percent of what is left will be killed off during the flood, which could lead to only 62.5 million in shell pounds produced this year, he said.

In addition, more areas of the state will be impacted than last year because there is overbank flooding in the lower Mississippi River, and the flooding down the Atchafalaya River will impact western Terrebonne, Vermilion and Iberia parishes, he said.

“Right now, I’ve not heard of any (oyster) mortalities yet,” Voisin said. There has been a lot of wind that has helped mix the salt and fresh water, but mortalities are expected.

After years of work, the oyster industry was able to purchase crop insurance in 2009 for the first time and then again in 2010, he said.

However, because the crop insurance only covers natural disasters — not man-made — and because of concerns about problems that might arise this year that couldn’t be separated from oil-related problems, no insurance for this year was suspended, Voisin explained.

“The year we need the insurance, it was suspended,” he said.

The number of disasters the oyster industry has faced since 2005 with hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike and the BP oil leak, it’s possible that flooding this year could be the “straw that breaks the backs for some small farmers,” he said.

The high water will mean more oysters in the future, but it will take three or four years before that happens, he said.

“We’re down, but we’re not out,” Voisin said.