NEW IBERIA — Acadiana crawfish will soon be on the table of diners in European countries as the American Seafood Company in New Iberia started processing them Tuesday, with shipment expected this weekend.

According to George Pebsworth, manager of the company, 40,000 pounds can be processed daily at the new $1.4 million plant, located in the Industrial Park at the Acadia Regional Airport.

Pebsworth predicted that 3 million pounds may be processed if there is ample supply this season. Crawfish are being supplied from ponds in the area and the Atchafalaya Basin.

The American Seafood Company is co-owned by Anders Sundqvist and Stefan Hedburt. Although the company has plants in other countries, the Louisiana plant is its first in the U.S.

The company's foreign locations previously depended on Turkey for their crawfish supply.

“Two years ago, the Turkish lakes supplying the crawfish were hit by a plague and the company began to look for other sources,” said Pebsworth.

Last September, the company began to modify the old Duck Industries building at the airport to meet its requirements. It is now a three-floor facility with administrative offices, shipping and processing areas and a laboratory for quality control.

After the crawfish arrive at the plant, the complete cycle of processing is slightly less than two hours from door to packaging.

Pebsworth explained.

The plant is currently using two shifts, but during full production, there will be three — two to process and one to clean up.

The plant will employ 100-150 people with each group working an 8-hour shift.

The most important thing is quality control; perfection is the goal, said Pebsworth. Crawfish are examined for broken claws, small size or other imperfections and these are rejected.

The selected ones are sent to a holding cooler. After that, they are washed and ready for cooking. Cooking time is about seven minutes, but the time length and heat are dependent on a lab test. The lab test will show at what temperature and time the enzymes are immobilized, Pebsworth explained.

Pebsworth said the temperature for freezing is between 90-110 degrees below freezing. This is a cryogenic process that prevents ice crystals from being formed in the flesh and preserves the body by very low temperatures. When thawed, the meat of the crawfish is just as fresh as it was when it arrived at the plant. Crawfish are frozen whole.

“There's also a plan to process some tails and use a glazing type of freezing, possibly for the microwave,” said Pebsworth.

Future plans also include the processing of oysters, crabs, shrimp, finfish, alligator meat, and other “items that will sell.”

Crawfish processed at the New Iberia plant will be taken by truck to New Orleans in a frozen whole state, where they will be packed in one kilo (2.2 pounds) packages.

Upon reaching New Orleans, they will be loaded on ships bound for European markets, such as France, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. From New Iberia to foreign markets, the time is about 60 days.

“People in these countries like to eat crawfish cold, such as in salads and cocktails,” he said. “A favorite dish is a soup using whole crawfish known as 'a la nage.'”

During shipment from New Orleans, the crawfish are refrigerated and monitored every two hours to see that there is no temperature change. Pebsworth noted that shipping by sea is cheaper and maintaining the controlled temperatures is easier than by airplane.

Pebsworth gives three reasons for the company locating in New Iberia:

“New Iberia is in the center of the crawfish and seafood area between New Orleans and Cameron Parish; local officials gave us support and encouragement; and this community had a clean look with mowed lawns and flowers,” Pebsworth said.

“We didn’t want to locate in a port city with an environment of oil barges. Our company has spent money on landscaping our building.”

Pebsworth explained that the parish government, the Greater New Iberia Chamber of Commerce and the Industrial Development Center all helped with the company's decision to locate in New Iberia.

The parish cooperated through Sewerage District No. 1 to provide proper sewerage lines for waste disposal.

“Our wastes are no more than what a large apartment building would need,” Pebworth said.

“We knew about this area long before your people started promoting crawfish,” said Pebworth.