Impasse reached in Basin boycott against crawfishing

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PIERRE PART — In this Atchafalaya Basin community that boasts of being the crawfish capital of the universe, a boycott against crawfishing which began last Thursday is continuing, and an impasse has been reached between commercial fishermen demanding a higher price for the crustaceans and a group of buyers who refuse to pay more per pound.

As predicted by the participating fishermen, the ban also has resulted in a slight decrease in supplies of the popular seafood available to processors and to the public in the Baton Rouge area.

The “fish-out” began when most basin crawfish buyers lowered the average price of crawfish to 25 cents per pound last week. Members of the Louisiana Crawfish Producers Association decided to fight the price decrease, which traditionally follows the Catholic Lenten season and the observance of Easter.

Since the ban began last week, an estimated 95 percent of the basin’s crawfish production has halted and more than 900 fishermen are participating, said John Roe Sr. of Morgan City, LCFA vice president and spokesman.

Roe said his group has met with hundreds of commercial fishermen from the Pierre Part, Belle River and Morgan City areas, as well as several hundred from the Henderson and Catahoula areas in the basin. Support of the ban, he said, has been “overwhelming,” and the ban will continue at least through Wednesday.

Thus far, the request for a bottom price of 35 cents per pound for crawfish has spawned resentment among some wholesalers in the Pierre Part area, Roe told the Advocate. He said he has been told that some wholesalers and retailers in the area “have vowed they won’t meet the price” and that the businesses also have influenced other buyers in the Henderson area to follow suit.

Referring to the standoff by some buyers as “bullheadedness,” Roe said the crawfishing ban will continue and a meeting will be held Wednesday night to discuss the situation. Set for 7:30 p.m. at the Pierre Part American Legion Hall, the meeting will be open to the public.

If a majority of the buyers of basin crawfish do not raise the base price to at least 35 cents per pound by Wednesday’s meeting, Roe said, the association, which now has more than 500 members, “will be ready to truck our own” live crawfish supplies.

Trucks for shipping crawfish to buyers and processors in New Orleans, Lafayette and Baton Rouge — where prices generally are better — are ready to roll.

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available to the participating fishermen, Roe said, and the association "can handle everything that comes out of the east and west sides of the basin." He added that, by Thursday, an estimated 80 percent of the production in the basin "will pick up again." Another option that could result from Wednesday's meeting would be the establishment of a committee to negotiate with buyers, Roe said. This would not simply be a buying station, he stressed, but "a legitimate business." The group has been contacted by buyers interested in dealing directly with the association and its members, Roe said. Local buyers not supporting the price increase, he added, will be bypassed and "when we do that I'm afraid they will suffer great financial losses."

"They (area buyers) have publicly and privately said a number of times they're going to bust up the organization," Roe said. "But the fishermen are getting organized, and they (buyers) may as well face it. We feel we have a very clear conscience and asked for a fair shake and we haven't gotten it,"

The ban has resulted in a decrease in the amount of crawfish being taken to buyers, and Roe estimated that only 3 percent of the basin's normal production for this time in the season is making it to the buyers.

A check at several seafood markets revealed that the past week's supply of crawfish was lower than it had been before the crawfishing ban and that most orders for the delicacy were filled for consumers.

Louis Germany, co-owner of Acadian Seafood Market in Baton Rouge, said the business did experience some problems because of a short supply, and "bought five sacks here and there instead of 5,000 pounds." The price for live crawfish was 49 cents per pound, but currently is 59 cents, he added.

At Baker Seafood Market Inc. in Baker, Anthony Lamonie said the business "is not getting the supply we need." The business normally deals directly with fishermen, he said, and pays them between 30 cents and 35 cents per pound. Live crawfish currently is sold at 45 cents per pound, Lamonie said.

A good supply of crawfish was available over the weekend at Atchafalaya Crawfish Processors in Henderson, said Ron Noel. Although the supply is lower than in previous weeks, "we're sticking it out to see what happens," he said. Live crawfish sells for 69 cents per pound wholesale and 40 cents retail, according to Noel.

An employee at Drusilla Seafood Market in Baton Rouge said the local business experienced no supply problems and "if someone places an order, we'll fill it for them." She said live crawfish sells for 65 cents per pound for a sack, 69 cents per pound loose, and $1.89 per pound boiled.

"Our supply over the weekend was great," reported L.E. Sims at Highland Road Fish Market in Baton Rouge, who said his market was able to fill orders without problems with its supplier, and "we and the crawfish processors are working together and started cutting (prices) from our end" and not decreasing the price to the fishermen, he said. "Certain groups, buyers, were cutting the price to 40 cents, and those people can't make a living that way."

Sims said live crawfish currently sells for 45 cents a pound.

It appears that the large-scale fish-out will continue in the Atchafalaya Basin at least until the LCPA membership discusses the situation for the remainder of the current crawfish season.

"We've gone past the day when a few dealers can control a 75-million-pound-a-year industry," Roe said. "It's time we get organized, and that's what we're doing. These buyers say they cut the price because dealers won't pay it, and before fishermen didn't have any choice. Now we're getting down... (Continued from 1B)