Immigration problems impact crawfish season

BY MARK BALLARD
mballard@theadvocate.com

Going into what is supposed to be the biggest sales week of the crawfish season, processor Dexter Guillory, of Eunice, says he is nothing but worried.

One month into the peak season, during which the crawfish industry makes most of its money, an immigration kerfuffle has kept Guillory and most of the owners of the state's dozen or so processors from hiring enough peelers.

Most of the workers come from Mexico and Central America. Without the peelers, the processors will stop buying as much crawfish from the fishermen. "If we can't buy them and the fishermen don't get the money they need, the pyramid starts to cave in," Guillory said.

Sherbin Collette agrees: "It could be that we lose half the industry. It's that serious. It's positively an emergency."

A fisherman and the mayor of Henderson, which sits

See CRAWFISH, page 8A
on the edge of the Atchafalaya Basin where most of the wild crawfish are harvested between mid-February and early June, Collette sees about 50 percent “of the season going to pot.”

Louisiana officials are aware and spent much of last week scurrying around Washington, D.C., trying to craft some sort of emergency solution to what has been a double-whammy for the program that allows people from other countries to get work permits for seasonal jobs.

Congress limits the number of permits, called H-2B visas, to 66,000 a year. The U.S. Department of Labor issues 33,000 every six months and had reached that cap in January. Then on March 4, a federal district court in Florida ruled that the Labor Department exceeded its authority by issuing permits. The court said the department did not have the authority to write the rules used to issue the permits, causing an already slowed-down system to stop completely, leaving crawfish processors short-handed.

“Without the ability to hire such seasonal workers, many local businesses will be severely impacted, and some may be unable to operate,” Louisiana’s six congressmen and two senators wrote March 17 to U.S. Labor Secretary Thomas Perez.

On March 18, the court allowed the Labor Department to restart its processing, but only until April 15 when new rules could be crafted. The Labor Department is handling applications that already had been filed and were being processed when the halt order arrived.

But new rules have a process too, one that allows for public comment. That means nothing would be ready until late August, said Louisiana Agriculture Commissioner Mike Strain, who spent much of last week meeting with federal authorities and congressmen.

“That’s too long. That’s too late for crawfish processors,” Strain said. “We’ll be asking for an executive memo to implement an emergency rule prior to the public comment phase.”

Republican U.S. Rep. Charles Boustany, of Lafayette, whose Acadiana district covers much of the affected area, asked on March 24 that the congressional chairmen in charge of the federal agencies handling the permits reinstate an exemption for returning workers, which would allow many of the crawfish peelers to go to work.

These workers differ from the foreigners brought in to work on farms. Most of H-2B seasonal workers do landscaping and clean hotel rooms. But there are wide varieties of jobs across the U.S. for which these foreign workers are hired.

Employers have to show no U.S. citizens want the short-term jobs. The foreign workers pay taxes on their earnings then go home after a few months.

Louisiana hired 5,546 H-2B workers in 2014, according to the U.S. Labor Department, which was third behind Texas and Florida. They are put to work processing seafood, sugar cane and crawfish.

“It could be that we lose half the industry. It’s that serious. It’s positively an emergency.”

SHERBIN COLLETTE, Henderson Mayor

“We are unable to operate.” Louisiana’s Secretary Thomas Perez.

filed and were being processed cations that already had been Department is handling appli-

itors wrote March 17 to U.S. La-

sas, to 66,000 a year. The U.S.

scurrying around Washington,

s of peak production.

Between mid-February and early June, fishermen pole out into shallow swamps, set their traps, harvest and sack crawfish. The fishermen sell the sacks of live crawfish to the processors, who sort the crustaceans by size, selling the larger ones to retailers and keeping the smaller ones to peel, then selling the tail meat in frozen one-pound bags.

If the retailers buy fewer sacks, which often happens when weekend weather is bad, the processors peel the leftover sacks as well. But without enough peelers, the processors have no choice but to buy fewer sacks from the fishermen.

Prices usually drop after Easter Sunday, which is next week this year, because the demand is not as high, but processors are able to handle the change by peeling more.

What likely will happen when the processors stop buying as much, says Mayor Collette, is that fishermen will start selling crawfish, unsorted by size, from the side of the road at lower prices. Then next year, the fishermen will find something else to do.

Ag Commissioner Strain said the crawfish industry’s losses this year could be as much as $30 million out of the $100 million industry.

“Truthfully, they really needed those seasonal workers four to five weeks ago,” the Farm Bureau’s Breaux said.