La. alligator season ends; prices down

By The Associated Press

HOUMA — Hides brought their lowest prices since 1986 when Louisiana's alligator season ended Sunday, but a state official said he expected the market to level off in 1993.

The average price for a 7-foot alligator, the average harvested during the last decade, was $22 to $23 per foot, said Noel Kinler, who heads the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' alligator program.

A 6-foot alligator fetched $17 to $18 per foot, a 5-foot animal $14 to $15.

"1986 was probably the last time they were this low," Kinler said. "It escalated from that point until 1990, when the average price was $50 to $55 per foot."

Although Hurricane Andrew hit just a few days before the season opened, hunters statewide had little trouble harvesting their allotment of 25,000 alligators, Kinler said. The department got a few complaints during the first few days of the season, but none as the season progressed, he said.

About 10,000 alligators are harvested in Terrebonne, Lafourche and St. Mary parishes each year. The state issues alligator tags to property owners. The number of tags is based on the number of nests per acre and whether all of the tags were filled the previous year.

Al Mahler, owner of The Sportsman's Corner Seafood in Houma, said he hopes the 1993 prices will be closer to the $30 to $35 per foot that hides brought a year ago.

Higher prices are important because most people lease the property they hunt.

Typically, hunters pay landowners between 25 percent and 35 percent of the alligators' value for a lease, Mahler said. But he knows of one hunter who pays 50 percent because he leases from the state.

Running a line for a month can get pretty aggravating, Mahler said.

Kinler said he doesn't expect prices to drop any lower next year, although the market in alligator hides, like furs, is volatile.

Tanners are trying to increase the prices so they don't lose too much money on the hides they have already bought, he said. But it takes a while for cheaper raw goods to affect the price on shelf stores.

"I think what happened was back in the late '80s, there was a great demand for skins, and prices escalated probably higher than they should have been," Kinler said.

Consumers didn't want to buy alligator products at the higher prices, he said. Their reluctance coupled with a worldwide recession sent hide prices tumbling, he said.