Gerald Romero harvests crawfish for Perate's Restaurant in Erath from ponds off La. 339, just south of Erath. Many southwest Louisiana crawfish farmers have faced disastrous conditions this season.

Lawsuits blame pesticide as cause of farmers' affliction

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LAFAYETTE — A new rice pesticide may have spawned the crawfish production disaster that afflicted southwest Louisiana farmers this year.

If it's determined that a pesticide named Icon is truly deadly to crawfish, as a recently released LSU study suggests, its maker, Aventis CropScience of Research Triangle Park, N.C., may have to pay millions in restitution to those same farmers.

The France-based organization, which employs 90,000 workers worldwide, said it will fight the allegations.

"Aventis CropScience fully disputes the apparent conclusions ... from the LSU AgCenter that alleges a 'possible' relationship between the use of the company's Icon-treated rice seed and declines in crawfish production," said Rick Roundtree in a news release.

Earlier Tuesday it was announced at the Lafayette Holidome that two separate class-action lawsuits against Aventis are being filed on behalf of hundreds of Louisiana farmers and pesticide dealers.

"Farmers kept insisting there was a problem with this pesticide," said Hunter Lundy, a Lake Charles attorney representing the farmers. "Their complaints met deaf ears. One tragic aspect of Icon's toxicity is that no one knows through how many crawfish seasons Icon or its derivatives will decimate the crawfish industry."

Icon contains the pesticide fipronil, which is deadly to crawfish. Once the Icon-treated seed is in the ground, Icon breaks down into derivatives and filters into the sediment where crawfish feed.

In fields sown with Icon or flooded with water from Icon-treated fields, farmers lost all or nearly all the ensuing crawfish crop.

State Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom also came in for harsh criticism from Lundy for being soft on the problem.

"If Icon is proven to be what the study says it may be, we'll have to look for another product," Odom is quoted as saying in the Tuesday Times-Picayune.

"There's no question Icon kills water weevils effectively," Lundy said in response to Odom. "And kills crawfish effectively. Some people are still posturing when it's obvious what the problem is."

Rice and crawfish field production feed off one another in southwest Louisiana.

Rice farmers produce a crop worth about $240 million annually while crawfish adds another growing season and another $40 million from the same fields, according to 1999 Department of Agriculture figures.

Normal crawfish production in Louisiana ranges from 25 million to 50 million pounds. This year, dogged by drought and unseasonably warm temperatures, the 80,000 acres of rice used to raise crawfish in 13 south Louisiana parishes has produced about half the norm.

Extreme heat and drought had been thought to be the principal causes of the crawfish shortage until Louisiana State University released its preliminary findings Friday. Dr. Ray McClain, of LSU's AgCenter Rice Research Station in Crowley, said the study was designed to quell concern over Icon.

"This was a study under extreme conditions that are unlikely to occur in a natural setting," McClain said. "But we felt if the crawfish could survive these simulated conditions, then this would put to rest part of the controversy over Icon."

"But it didn't."

Although LSU's findings are preliminary, Aventis CropScience is under fire for their testing methods employed before releasing the pesticide in 1999.

"Icon is killing our crawfish and poses a significant threat to Louisiana's crawfish industry," Lundy said.

Icon worked quite well in killing the rice water weevil, Lundy acknowledged. And there is no danger to humans.

"Because the crawfish exposed to Icon have all been wiped out," he said.