NEW ORLEANS, La.—Call it a spice crisis. Although the Asian crisis has been eroding Louisiana's exports for two years, it took plunging pre-packaged food sales, including spices, to shove the state out of the top 10 in exports.

Louisiana's worldwide exports declined 13 percent to $8.3 billion during the first half of 1999 compared to the same time a year ago. That dropped Louisiana from No. 9 to the 12th-largest exporting state in the country.

Processed foods, including pre-packaged mixes and spices, lost the most value of all Louisiana export sectors, according to a report by the World Trade Center of New Orleans. A 37 percent drop-off in pre-packaged goods caused exports in that category to slip $800 million to $1.5 billion.

"Processed foods have traditionally been a strong export sector for Louisiana so this comes as a surprise," said Jack Walker, government and transportation affairs manager for WTC.

Larry Collins, director of international trade for the Louisiana Department of Economic Development, warned that business buying patterns are shifting abroad.

"Louisiana companies will have to adapt for our state to maintain its ranking," Collins said.

The Asian crisis continues to linger as Japan, Louisiana's top export destination, purchased $1.2 billion in goods, a 10 percent decrease.

Taiwan, the country where the Asian crisis began, increased its Louisiana purchases 91 percent to $450 million as the Pelican State's No. 4 trading partner. But the earthquake that rocked Taiwan on Tuesday means that expansion can't be counted upon in the next quarter.

"The dramatic increase in trade with Taiwan is an indication they are in a growth mode after rebounding from the effects of the Asian economic downturn; however, the earthquake recovery will have an as-yet-to-be-determined effect on their imports from Louisiana," Collins said in a press release.

Mexico, Louisiana's No. 2 destination, boosted its buys 11 percent to $664 million and No. 3 Canada spent $535 million, a 2 percent increase.

"The continuing export success story for Louisiana is in our trade with Mexico, which has grown dramatically and has bright prospects for future growth," Collins said.

Rounding out the top five in Louisiana export destinations is The Netherlands, an important distribution hub for Europe, which increased 12 percent to $348 million. Nearly all Louisiana export categories showed decreases.

Louisiana's top export continues to be agricultural products at $3.9 billion, off 4 percent. No. 2 is chemicals and allied products at $1.6 billion after a 7 percent decrease.

Industrial machinery is off 2.9 percent to $246.7 million; transportation equipment fell 9.3 percent to $160 million; and bituminous coal and lignite mining dropped 5.9 percent to $55 million.

Petroleum and coal products did increase 11.5 percent to $376 million. Apparel and other textile products rocketed ahead 315 percent to $74 million.