LSU develops successful crawfish bait

By DICK WRIGHT
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Artificial crawfish bait developed by LSU researchers has been so successful that six major companies are now making and marketing products from the formulas.

Professor James Avault said development of a successful artificial crawfish bait is a real breakthrough for crawfishers, who have long baited traps with fish, mainly shad.

The Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station, with partial funding from the Board of Regents, began the search for a workable crawfish bait about five years ago, he said.

Avault, with student assistants and a research associate, arrived at a bait that meets the basic requirements of luring crawfish into traps.

The bait is a workable and affordable substitute for the commonly used shad, which had to be caught, frozen and cut up for bait, Avault said.

An artificial bait also means crawfishers won't be caught in mid-season with a shortage of bait fish, he said.

"It was not unusual for the shad to become depleted right in midst of the crawfish harvesting season," Avault said. "Then the crawfishermen would use anything they could get their hands on, mostly other fish or cotton seed cake, none of which were really satisfactory."

So, Avault said, experiment station research was aimed at finding a bait that caught crawfish as well as the shad did, was moderately priced, and did not require storage in a freezer.

Avault and graduate students searched the spectrum of possible lures, carriers and binders for a man-made bait.

Successful formulas contain an attractant, such as catfish oil, that will lure crawfish into traps; a carrier for the attractant such as fishmeal or soybean meal, and a binder to keep the chunks of bait from melting in water too quickly.

"We have developed a series of artificial baits that outperform shad," Avault said. "We have screened dozens and dozens of different formulas in all sizes and shapes."

Their findings have been passed on to crawfish farmers and trappers through county agents. They also were made available to manufacturers.

Six major companies are making the bait, Avault said. But along with reliable makers, Avault warned, came operations that have put some bad artificial bait on the market.

"Some bait manufacturers got on the bandwagon and started making inferior baits. One or two artificial baits would actually kill crawfish," Avault said.

Such bait is high in a material that gives off ammonia, which is toxic to crawfish, he said.

Avault said the best protection against a crawfisher's buying bad bait is to check with a county agent or find out what other fishermen are using with good results.

"I don't want to leave (the subject) with that sour taste," Avault said. "Many bait manufacturers ... are just doing an outstanding job of putting together baits. There are just a few of these fly-by-nighters putting in whatever is handy to make a big pellet and put it in a nice bag and sell it cheaply."

LSU does not receive royalties or other payment for its research, but Avault said he hopes the experiment station will share in revenue collected by the new Louisiana Crawfish Promotion and Research Board.

Avault credits development of a successful artificial bait with helping get the board established by the Legislature last year. An agency under the Louisiana Department of Agriculture, the board draws revenue from a voluntary assessment on the sale of artificial crawfish bait.

Initial success doesn't mean the end of the research, Avault said.

"You'd think that once we found the winning formula our research would end, but that is not the case," he said.

The research now turns to finding lower-cost ingredients, baits for warm water and cold water, and a bait that will hold up better in flowing water, he said.

Avault expects manufacturers will do well in accounting for the market. Demand apparently has been lively. Avault said one businessman told him he "made more money in a matter of three weeks selling crawfish bait than he made in the sale of cattle range pellets for the whole year."

Orrin Dupuis, who has 600 acres of crawfish ponds near Breaux Bridge and is president of the Louisiana Crawfish Farmers Association, said he has used artificial bait and welcomes it, though he finds fish sometimes works better than some brands of bait he has used.

Some of the problems he mentioned coincide with ones Avault said need further research. Dupuis said he sees crawfishermen loading up with both artificial bait and fish.

"It has really helped the industry," Dupuis said.

"There are times when we can't find fish bait," he said. "Even if in a particular situation fish is better, it's nice to know artificial bait is available."

Avault expects manufacturers will also conduct their own research and development.

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