Lawmaker offers legislation to protect crabs

By Jonas Breaux

By Staff Writer

CYPREMORT POINT—Holding crabs for extended periods while waiting for them to molt and become softshelled crabs can make them die sooner if they are held too long.

On Wednesday, state Rep. Syndie Mae Durand intends to introduce legislation aimed at decreasing the number of crabs lost during the holding period.

Durand (D-Parks) told The Advertiser that House Bill No. 1674 seeks to change the minimum width of premolt crabs held by fishermen for processing as soft shell crabs as well as placing restrictions on which premolt crabs can be kept for processing.

"Fishermen can tell when a crab is going to molt by colored lines which appear on the back paddle fin," Durand said. "This line changes colors as the crab gets closer to molting. It first appears as a white line and then progresses to pink and finally red."

Durand said present state law requires "premolt crabs which are less than five inches in width held by a fisherman for processing as softshell crabs or sold by the fisherman to a processor for making of softshell crabs to be identifiable as premolt crabs and sold in separate containers marked 'peelers' or 'busters.'"

"Provides that a sign that a crab is in premolt stages is that they are no further from molting than having a white line on the back paddle fin," Durand said.

"Vince Guillory, a marine biologist with the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, said the white line on the back paddle fin is the first indication that a crab is beginning to molt."

Guillory said the line's color will progress from white to pink and from pink to red. When the line reaches the red stage the crab will molt within two to three days.

The legislation proposed by Durand provides that "a sign that a crab is in premolt stage is that they are not further from molting than having a red line on the back paddle fin."

"According to Guillory, mortality problems do increase the longer a crab is held in trays until they molt. He said white line crabs require feeding which can present problems for processors if water quality is not monitored."

"Fishermen make a habit of culling crabs looking for premolters because they get a premium price for them," Guillory said. "If fishermen are restricted from holding white or pink liners it could reduce the mortality rate."

Guillory said molting is a very special time for female crabs. Not only are they growing but it also is a time for reproduction.

"Crabs mate in the final stage of molting for the female," Guillory said. "After mating, the female store the sperm for a year before she spawns."

"According to Guillory, last season was on the poor side for Louisiana crabbers which naturally drove the price of crabs upward."

He said early indicators for the upcoming season (June-October) aren't that encouraging.

"We have been seeing a lot of small crabs in our test surveys," Guillory said. "But that doesn't mean things are going to turn around from last year."

The Associated Press recently reported that restaurants from Maryland to Boston charged anywhere from $14 - $30 a dozen for bluepoint crabs last year and that prices this year are projected to be in the $16 - $36 range.

Crab prices were inflated in Louisiana last year as well.

"Crabs were pretty scarce at times last year," said Lee Breaux, of Breaux's Seafood in Leroy. "We charged $10 a dozen for large blue-point crabs at the end of the season and that's where my price is starting out this year."

Durand said her bill may not lead to a dramatic increase in the crab population but "in its own small way the bill attempts to do something, instead of nothing."