Little mudbugs hurt price but crawfish production up

By Pamela Glisson

Business Writer

Production of crawfish is likely up this season, but price and size are down, said a local expert on the critters. And nobody’s makin’ money.

With a lot of ponds now beginning to close, Perry Lavergne of New Iberia claimed that — especially in rice fields — farmers are facing the opposite situation they did last year, when production was down and size was up.

Crawfish size is significant because modern demand is for the big ones, particularly in valuable foreign markets such as Sweden. “I would predict that they’re going to be relatively short for the Swedish exports,” said Lavergne, who is a member of the board of directors of the Louisiana Crawfish Association. He added that export prices will be high.

General prices here, though, are running low. Peeling plants are paying 20 to 30 cents a pound for small fish, said Lavergne. Larger fish get 75 to 80 cents a pound.

In 1990, farm-raised crawfish brought $35 million to Louisiana — with Acadiana responsible for about two-thirds.

Lavergne said a warm spell in November, following frost, hurt this season’s water quality. That, in turn, led to an abundance of small fish, so that not many of them were able to bulk up.

As a result, although Lavergne said production varies from pond to pond, “The large crawfish were very scarce.”

Crawfish farming in Louisiana became big business in the past decade. The 1991 Louisiana Seafood Industry Study reported that from 1980 to the late ’80s, annual harvests more than doubled and acreage nearly tripled.

The Institute of Food Technologists in Chicago, IL attributes growing popularity of aquaculture not only to increased consumer demand both here and abroad, but also to the easier quality control and quicker growth of farm-raised fish.

But despite the broadspread interest, Lavergne said it’s too early to tell how farmers will approach the next season. “Nobody really made any money growing crawfish this year, so that could affect next year’s acreage,” he said.