Many crawfish processors left holding the bag

Seafood ban could affect as much as 25 percent of Louisiana's crawfish crop.

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LAFFAYETTE — The U.S. Food and Drug Administration in August banned out-of-state sales of vacuum-packed fresh seafood, including crawfish.

That prohibition will effectively benefit the cheap, Chinese mudbugs, said local processors Thursday in a state Cooperative Extension Service meeting at the Girard Park Recreation Center.

Frank Randol of Randol’s Restaurant has been processing crawfish since 1971. He says whether the feds shroud the subject in bags or bacteria, the real issue is the crippling of the fresh seafood industry.

“All of a sudden, we’re moving closer and closer to having a fully-frozen product on the grocery store shelves in a traditional market that is only used to having a fresh product,” Randol said. “The only thing that really differentiated us from the imports is the ability to produce that fresh product. Now, all of a sudden, that fresh Louisiana product is endangered in the state of Louisiana, which means the Chinese product, which has always given us unfair competition, is now on a par because they’re both a frozen product.”

The ban could affect as much as 25 percent of Louisiana’s crawfish crop, according to the LSU Agriculture Center. Louisiana’s 1998 crawfish crop was valued at $41.5 million before processing or other value enhancement measures.

“There is some concern about how we package crawfish and other seafood in order to prevent any bacterial growth,” said Mark Shirley, Aquacultural Agent with the LSU Agriculture Center. “It’s important to understand that we’ve been vacuum packaging crawfish for the last 20 years and there have been no problems associated with bacterial growth or any contamination problems.”

The feds say the new FDA regulation is meant to prevent problems with a certain bacteria that can produce a toxin without air and at temperatures above 36 degrees. The new standards, called Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points, are required in all seafood plants.

“We see this more in canned products, so it’s overprecaution by the FDA to make sure there is no possibility of bacterial growth in our crawfish meat,” Shirley said.

Processors say the expense of switching to FDA-approved polyethylene bags, and other costs associated with compliance, is taking a bigger bite out of an already slim profit margin.

“We’re telling (processors) to use up the bags they have on hand, just don’t vacuum them,” said Jody Guidry, of the Louisiana Department of Health.