An official word of gloom was voiced Friday for Louisiana's many thousands of crawfish devotees by one of the state's leading experts on "mud-bugology."

It seems that Old Man Winter is playing a dirty trick on the consumers of the little lobster lookalikes by keeping the temperature of the usually productive waters at an unusual, and frustrating, low.

And because of the recent frigid weather experienced by South Louisiana, this season's crawfish crop will more than likely be a disappointing one for those who covet the tasty crustaceans, according to Cecil LaCaze, supervisor of Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission District Six in Opelousas.

LaCaze, who until last year served as a crawfish biologist with the WL&FC, said in an interview Friday that the state's crawfish—both farm-grown and swamp-bred—are not as large and plentiful as they ordinarily would be at mid-February because of a couple of reasons, both of which may be blamed on nature:

—First, unlike last year when winter practically bypassed South Louisiana, the cold hit and hit hard this year, causing the crawfish to remain in their dormant state instead of popping out to feed.

—And second, the Atchafalaya Basin—the source of a great deal of this area's crawfish—has been at a very high level due to unseasonably heavy rains up north. This, explained LaCaze, prevents many of the fish from dying off in dried-out mud holes as they normally would. Instead, the fish thrived in the high waters, feeding lustily on the crawfish.

Although LaCaze holds no hope for improvement during the remainder of February, he is optimistic that warmer weather which usually arrives in March will bring an increased quantity and better quality of crawfish.

"If we can get just three continuous weeks of weather in the 75-80 degree range it will be sufficient to raise the water temperature enough for the crawfish to mature sufficiently and become abundant," added LaCaze. But if the cold weather lingers on through March, he cautioned, "it may even be as late as April or May before we have a great number of crawfish caught."

Last year, LaCaze said, Louisiana produced an estimated 25 million pounds of crawfish. However, he fears that this season's total will be significantly lower.

"An educated guess is that they may be down to 15-20 million pounds. There's just no way to predict crawfish crops—no way," LaCaze concluded.