CRAWFISH DYING IN ATCHAFALAYA BASIN

Mudbugs Climbing Trees As Clear Water Moves In

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CATAHOULA — The Atchafalaya Basin is about 75 miles long and 16 miles wide; plenty big enough for the crawfish who call it home. Yet, hordes of them are scrambling out of the water onto trees and banks as if overcrowding was forcing them from their habitat.

What’s happening is that the crawfish are coming ashore or climbing onto cypress trees to get oxygen after clear water from Henderson Bay overflowed basin locks and upset their natural muddy environment.

Effects

Crawfishermen along the levee are feeling the effects of the clear water invasion. They’re dragging up traps that are either empty or loaded with dead crawfish.

Some are hauling in their traps and calling it quits, dismayed that the crawfish season has reached its end in the Atchafalaya Basin one month short of its regular season.

“This is the worst it has ever been,” said one commercial fisherman at the Catahoula dock yesterday who pulled 1,900 pounds of crawfish out of the Basin last week but came up empty the last three days.

“I’ve pulled up my traps and won’t be coming back until next season,” he added. “If I do, I’ll have to use some 5½ foot extender traps to get them in with room to circulate and get oxygen.”

No Oxygen

He said maybe that wouldn’t work either. And, he isn’t alone. Other area crawfishermen have reported that the crawfish takes are getting smaller because they are dying from lack of oxygen.

“This is going to hurt a lot of people,” said Police Jury President Lloyd “Red” Higginbotham. “The catfish fishermen will be caught in this too, and area retail seafood prices will certainly increase as the crawfish and catfish harvests decrease.”

The muddy waters of the Atchafalaya Basin makes it the best oxygenated habitat for the crustaceans. However, the clear water that flowed in from Henderson Lake and the Atchafalaya River pushed the muddy bottom south sooner than usual. This natural river flow was speeded up by the flooding in the north and melting snows, according to Don Gooch, director of the USL Crawfish Research Center. The result was the depletion of the oxygen supply and the crawfish in the basin.

Solution

The only possible solution to the problem in the Basin, according to Larry Hayes with the Lafayette Corps of Engineers, would be to build up the gated structure that holds the lake.

“The gates are deficient compared to more modern locks. If they were larger we could have a little Toledo Bend out there,” Hayes said. “When the water backs up into Henderson Lake, it clears up and when the rivers start dropping fast, like they’re doing now, the water backs into the basin. Larger locks could prevent the overflow.”

New Season

The crawfish season will pick up again, beginning around December when commercial fishermen farm crawfish ponds through April. From April to July, they take to the Basin and haul in thousands of pounds weekly to sell to the crawfish processors and restaurants in Acadiana.