New crawfish feed should improve catch

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CROWLEY — There may be no better eating than when Tante Marie serves up crawfish and rice cooked to perfection in a jambalaya or étouffée. Now, there's a rice variety that's designed to give the crawfish themselves a better meal.

The new strain developed by researchers at the LSU AgCenter Rice Research Station is called “Ecrevisse,” French for “crawfish.” It's intended for south Louisiana farmers who raise only crawfish in their ponds and do not use the ponds for regular rice production.

Steve Linscombe, one of its developers, said that Ecrevisse provides more vegetation than standard rice varieties. He said that the crawfish do not eat the rice or the plant it grows on, but that they do eat the bugs that eat the rice and plants. More vegetation means more bugs, and that means bigger and better crawfish, he said.

Those insects and small water organisms that eat the decaying rice plants make up the bulk of the crawfish diet, according to Ray McClain, an aquaculture specialist with the rice center.

Some farmers “double crop” their fields, Linscombe said. They grow a regular rice crop then flood the fields again. The stubble and whatever regrowth comes from it provides the basis for a food web that feeds the crawfish, Linscombe said.

Ecrevisse is not for them.

It is for farmers who use the so-called “monoculture system,” devoting ponds solely to crawfish, planting conventional rice varieties in late July or early August. They do not harvest the rice for grain.

The problem, McClain said, is that conventional rice varieties are susceptible to cold winter weather and do not always grow back in the spring.

Ecrevisse “has better cold tolerance and can have regrowth in the spring to produce good vegetation and provide the environment where crawfish thrive,” McClain said.

Ecrevisse will be harvested for rice to be used as seed, but not to be eaten by humans.

“The grain is of somewhat low quality and probably not acceptable for our typical grain uses,” Linscombe said.

But, Linscombe says, he expects Ecrevisse to contribute to bigger harvests of bigger crawfish from Acadiana's monoculture ponds. That, he said, will mean better profits for the farmer and nicer crawfish for Tante Marie's stew pot.