The past crawfish season, which lasted an unprecedented 24 months, has just recently ended. Never before has crawfish been available to the consumer for so many consecutive months," says Dr. Wendell Lorio, Extension aquaculture specialist with the LSU Agricultural Center.

And now another cycle in the life of crawfish is about to begin. Lorio says because of last year’s problems experienced by pond crawfish producers, he expects a five percent drop from the 115,500 arm-raised acres of crawfish in 1993-1994.

Crawfish farmers are already preparing for next year’s crop. Most have planted their forage crop of rice or sorghum sudan grass, or they may be depending on natural aquatic vegetation, such as alligator grass or smartweed.

The forage is food the crawfish will depend on for growth during the coming season. When flooded, the vegetation becomes food for the crawfish in the form of decaying plant material. Also feeding the new crop of young and the carroyver crawfish will be small plants, animals and bacteria in the rich organic materials found in crawfish ponds and areas where wild crawfish abound.

Crawfish farmers will begin flooding their ponds in October with expectations of next year’s crop. Lorio explains last year’s farm-raised crop was considerably down because of a cool spring and a dry summer. Affecting the fate of the pond crop at market were severe competition from wild crawfish, primarily from the Atchafalaya Basin.

Last season, crawfish farmers started the production year with abnormally low prices, mainly because of the high production of wild crawfish that had already occupied the market for the previous 18 months. In addition, competition from imported crawfish tail meat from China affected the crawfish industry to the point that Louisiana crawfish processors were reluctant to buy peeler-size crawfish for processing. Imported crawfish tail meat was offered to the consumer almost $2 a pound cheaper than Louisiana crawfish tail meat could be put in retail coolers.

Louisiana crawfish, like any aquacultural or agronomic crop, has many problems associated with production and marketing, Lorio says. Many producers actually have too many crawfish in their ponds. More crawfish result in smaller crawfish which have little or no marketability because most consumers want the larger crawfish.

In the area of marketing, competition from wild and imported crawfish has been a one-two punch for the industry. Despite these negatives, the Louisiana crawfish industry is very strong and leads the nation and world. The popularity of Louisiana crawfish among in-state and out-of-state consumers continues to grow.

The determining factor for the production of wild crawfish in the Atchafalaya Basin is water flow. If there is abundant water flowing through the Basin during the spring and summer of 1995, then wild crawfish will again affect crawfish farmers. The odds seem to be in favor of the crawfish farmer this season. There should be a greater demand for farm-produced crawfish, Lorio says.

As crawfish farmers flood their ponds this fall, they should remember that proper water management is a must. Taking samples of the crawfish crop increases a farmer’s knowledge of the population structure to be managed.

The Louisiana crawfish industry is one of the bright spots of in Louisiana aquaculture. The crawfish farmer should look at this coming season with anticipation because conditions have been favorable for a good production year.

Extension expert