When is a normal crawfish season not such good news? When it follows a bumper crop like local crawfish producers experienced in 1993.

That's the situation facing local consumers as the crawfish-eating season approaches the traditional spring boiling point. Supplies of the local delicacy are average or above average, but a confluence of meteorological and economic conditions won't produce the bumper crop of last year.

"It's very unlikely that there will be an abundance of large crawfish like there were last year," says Dr. Jay Huner, director of the Crawfish Research Center at USL.

Heavy spring rainfall contributed in large measure to the successful 1993 season. Much of the Atchafalaya Basin was covered with water for long periods of time, so fishermen were able to fish in areas usually not productive.

And fishermen remained active in the basin well into the summer and fall, which is unusual. "That season really never stopped," says Emile "Buddy" Duchamp, a crawfish buyer and processor from the St. Martin Parish community of Coteau Holmes.

Huner estimates that 70 million pounds of crawfish were landed in 1993, more than three times the normal yield.

Can the basin repeat its performance in 1994? Huner speculates that the odds are against it, unless abnormal weather conditions produce another year of heavy spring rainfall.

And Huner worries that poor fishing in the basin could create a shortfall of product. That's because local crawfish pond producers, the other major supplier, are not enjoying a good year.

"There has been a reduction in production in the Southwest Louisiana rice area," says Huner.

The causes?

- Prices to the producers have been low, partly as a result of the bumper 1993 crop;
- Crawfish did not flourish in the ponds because of a dry fall and colder than average winter;
- The price of rice is above average, so farmers can make more money planting that crop in fields otherwise reserved for crawfish ponds.

The result is that many producers are already draining their ponds in anticipation of spring planting.

Of course, all of this must be put into perspective. Duchamp thinks this year, on balance, will be a good one, just not so stellar as the once-in-a-decade type of season enjoyed in 1993. Warmer temperatures are already resulting in larger crawfish. And he expects to see lower prices shortly on crawfish meat in the stores.

"We had a colder winter, so the pond production is behind by a couple of weeks," he says. "I believe in the next week we are going to see prices on tail meat going down."

His bottom-line assessment: "I think we'll see an above average season.

But when it comes to crawfish, who wants "above average"? Don't be surprised to hear a lot of howling from temperamental crawfish hounds in Acadiana.

-RICHARD BAUDOYIN