Officials stop sales of imported crawfish

By PETER SHINKLE

Citing improper labels, the state agriculture department has halted sale of more than a ton of Chinese crawfish that has caused concern among Louisiana crawfish farmers, Commissioner of Agriculture Bob Odom said Thursday.

Agriculture inspectors halted the sales at three New Orleans-area seafood outlets, citing labels that failed to indicate the weight of the crawfish inside the package or the proper origin of the product, agriculture department officials said.

"One of the things we cannot do is interfere in trade," Odom told an aquacultural conference in Baton Rouge, in an apparent reference to the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of free trade. But Odom also made it clear that he is concerned about the competition Louisiana crawfish farmers are facing from the imported products.

"The problem is that labor in China is about 25 cents an hour," he said. Without putting restrictions on trade, Odom said, he wants to make sure Louisianians can compete with the Chinese mudbugs.

"What we're saying is we want to sell Louisiana products," he said. "You've got to compete equally with Louisiana products."

At the same time, the state-supported Louisiana Crawfish Promotion and Research Board has decided to spend $10,000 on a radio advertising campaign to promote Louisiana crawfish, Odom said.

Asked whether the department's action halting the sales was protectionist, Odom said, "If it was a Louisiana vendor we'd do the same thing."

Meanwhile, Charlie Chea, a Houston importer whose products were among those halted, said the actions by the state did not bother him because he is confident his crawfish have been properly packaged and inspected.

"I make money already, so I don't care," said Chea, owner of Houston-based Captain Charlie Seafood Co. He said he has no objection to the state's actions.

"If some schmuck dealer wants to do something to mislead the public, that (the action) is legitimate."

He said he has sold no crawfish directly to Louisiana, but has sold them to a broker in...
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Houston. Chea said he believed some distributors have removed his packaging from the crawfish to prevent their customers from buying directly from Chea.

However, the agriculture department released copies of the labeling from Captain Charlie crawfish blocked at Deanie's Seafood in Metairie. The labeling violated state regulations because it indicated only a weight of one pound, rather than indicating "net weight," which describes the weight of the product without the packaging, agriculture department spokesman Larry Michaud said.

The other crawfish, halted at the Louisiana Seafood Exchange and New Orleans Cold Storage, both in the New Orleans area, were distributed by another firm, Patlantic, also based in Houston, Michaud said.

Inspectors of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry are continuing to check for the improper packaging, he said. Crawfish that are blocked for sale can be sold if they are properly repackaged, he said.

Odom said that in some cases, the crawfish packages did not indicate the product was from China. The Captain Charlie label released by the department includes the words, "product of China."

Darren Chifici, manager of Deanie's, said he began importing the Chinese crawfish about a month ago because he could not buy local crawfish, which were out of season.

"It seems kind of a technicality," he said of the department's complaint about the labels.

Chifici said he would not buy more Chinese crawfish immediately because local crawfish are now available. He said he would use the Chinese crawfish in his restaurant.

Chea said he formed a joint venture with the Chinese government in early 1991, and imported about 150,000 pounds of Chinese crawfish last year from Jiangsu Province.

Chea rejected news accounts that said crawfish could be bought in China for $2.50 per pound.

"It's a lot higher than $2.50," he said.

"The Chinese people are not so stupid as to give the product away."

He added that he understands the reason for the concern about Chinese crawfish. "There is money involved. That's why they are trying to stop them, and I have no problem with that."

But he said the Chinese crawfish can benefit America because "our country needs more food, and this is good food."

Roy Johnson, an agriculture department marketing official who serves as staff to the Crawfish Promotion and Research Board, said the ad campaign will promote Louisiana crawfish and Zatarain's Seafood Boil, a seasoning.

Odom also said the department has tested the Chinese crawfish for excessive levels of pesticides, but so far no improper levels have been found.