Politicians seek crawfish tariffs

By M. Scott Morris
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HENDERSON — Louisiana politicians have taken up the crawfish cause and have made direct requests to place tariffs on Chinese crawfish.

During President Clinton's visit to Baton Rouge Thursday, Gov. Mike Foster presented the president a letter requesting that he include crawfish on a list of Chinese imports to be charged a 100 percent tariff.

The sanction list, which doesn't currently include crawfish, is in response to copyright infringement of U.S. videos and compact discs by Chinese corporations. The tariffs are scheduled to go into effect June 27.

"If you require a duty on the meat, that will cause the price of Chinese meat to double and end the unfair competitive edge that product now has over Louisiana meat," Foster said in the letter.

Processed Chinese crawfish tails are currently priced $2 to $3 a pound less than Louisiana crawfish tails.

U.S. Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-Chackbay, sent a similar request to Charlene Barshefsky, the acting U.S. trade representative. Tauzin has also requested that the International Trade Commission investigate the harm Chinese imports are causing Louisiana crawfishermen, processors and buyers.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 583,947 pounds of Chinese crawfish were imported into the U.S. in 1993, and that amount increased to 2.85 million pounds in 1996.

"I respectfully request that you carefully review this industry and consider the possibility of exercising options under section 201 of U.S. trade law to halt this unmitigated import surge," Tauzin wrote.

If an investigation of the market determines that Chinese crawfish are causing domestic producers to limit or shut down their operations, then the ITC can request that the president impose tariffs.

Gabe LeBlanc, a member of the Louisiana Crawfish Coalition who is scheduled to testify before the Office of the United States Trade Representative June 7, said the support of Louisiana's political leaders "throws a lot more weight on our program."

However, he said neither plan will offer a long-term solution.

The U.S. also proposed sanctions in response to copyright violations by Chinese companies last year, but they were not implemented. If tariffs are implemented this year, they will only last until U.S. and Chinese officials reach an agreement to settle the copyright dispute, LeBlanc said.

"That's a temporary fix," he said.