Low prices for pond-raised crawfish may push some producers out of the business this year

Pond crawfish acreage could drop 5,000 to 7,000 acres for the coming season, the first big drop since the boom in farm production began in the late 1980s, according to a report from the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

Louisiana producers farmed a high of 135,000 acres last season.

"This past season was a complete disaster for farmers in terms of low prices for their product. The consumer really has benefited from the problems of the industry," said the Extension's aquaculture specialist Larry de la Bretonne.

De la Bretonne said pond growers didn't get a high enough price for their crawfish for a number of reasons.

"For one thing, Lent and Easter came early," he said. Prices received by farmers were low going into Lent, and dropped for no reason other than that they traditionally drop at Easter.

"Every time the water rose, pond prices declined, and this ultimately decreased fishing of pond crawfish," de la Bretonne said. The basis went on to produce a good crop in a season that extended into August, he said.

He said pond production in March and April was hurt by prices that dropped to around 50 cents, below the break-even price for pond farmers.

De la Bretonne said the 1988-89 crop should total 65 million to 70 million pounds, with 60 percent caught in the wild of the basin. Industry production in 1987-88 was 80 million pounds, whereas the previous year's catch was 100 million, he said.

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from 12.3 pounds per person in 1982 to 15.4 pounds in 1987, dropping to 15 in 1988, he said.

Consumption of all seafood has been spurred by a health-conscious public and media hype, and the industry has benefited from a bullish stock market and good economic conditions nationally, Roberts said.

The price for crawfish hasn't risen dramatically in part because of a large increase in production, he said.

"We've had mixed results with crawfish," he said. "We've had expansion of acreage during that time, meaning we were selling more crawfish, but no one's price got better.

"This would tend to lead to the conclusion that crawfish is probably positioned in the market place about correctly for the consumer, who has been buying at a more stable price.

"We've had everything going right on the demand side. Since crawfish is a seafood, it has been hocked to the rising star of more consumption," he said.

"The crawfish producer sees this big rise in consumption and wants to know why his prices haven't gone up. The answer is the response in supply."

"The number of acres and pounds we produce more than match the increased demand for the product. So when supply increases faster than demand, the weakest part in the market — the producer — gets the feedback," Roberts said.