By Timothy Beacham
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LOUISA — Area wholesale seafood buyers report a general poor year for crawfish production in the Atchafalaya Basin.

Current high prices for peeled crawfish tails in supermarkets reflect the trouble that basin commercial fishermen are having bringing in a substantial catch to the buyer, according to several basin crawfish processors.

Many of the seafood wholesale buyers blame the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the fishing problem in the basin.

The corps, which closed a number of the channels which keep fresh water moving through the basin, is presently conducting a study to find remedies for a myriad of problems that surround the basin such as: low oxygen content in the water, lack of water flow to flush out "dead water" zones and silting.

"We need to do what is best for the basin as a whole," said Robert Campos, a corps project manager, at Monday's Environmental Forum held in New Orleans. "We won't do anything until the present study is finished in January 1996."

But the problem has already affected those who depend upon the basin for their source of income. Processors, who employ mostly women to peel crawfish say that they lose money on small crawfish.

"Louisiana women won't peel crawfish when they are as small as we have had them this year," said seafood buyer Daniel Edgar of St. Mary Seafood in Louisa. "This year has been below average in quality and the head count is 50 percent less than normal. The count per pound has been about 35-45 when the average is closer to 20-25."

"We have had to tell some fishermen that we won't buy their crawfish because they are too small," Edgar said.

Edgar, who has been in the fishing business since 1968 said this year's yield from basin fishermen is one of the poorest he can remember. He also said that he has lost an estimated $20,000 in production this season.

"There are three reasons for the poor year," Edgar said, "The water level came up late this year and forced the late growing season, the abundance of water hyacinths has choked the basin and the bad water problem caused by lack of flowing water has reduced the oxygen levels in the water."

According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist David Walter, LSU studies have shown that a lack of oxygenated water can stunt the growth of the freshwater crustacean.

Mike Blanchard, owner of Mike Blanchard Seafood in Pierre Part, agrees with Edgar.

"The quality of basin crawfish is 100 percent worse than last year," he said. "They won't grow because of the lack of fresh water."

"When the corps built those rock dams, they prevented the freshwater from coming in and now we have small crawfish," Blanchard explained.

Vernon Alleman, an independent buyer for Rivere Seafood in Pierre Part said this year there has been at least an 80 percent drop in the amount of crawfish produced from basin fishermen in his area.

"The corps has restricted the flow of water into the basin and brought this problem on," he said.

Lisa Blanchard of Blanchard's Seafood in Coteau Homes also agrees and even offered a solution to the bad water problem in the basin.

"They (the corps) don't have to spend thousands of dollars on a study of the basin, they need to pick up one of these old fishermen, bring him into the swamp and let him tell them where to dredge and what cuts to open," she said.

Commercial fisherman Carl Carline has been working closely with government and private agencies to speed up the opening of the canals, in particular the Dog Leg Canal located near Myette Point.

"It's too late for this year," said Carline, "But maybe we can salvage next year's harvest if they open the canals between now and the first of November."