Rains hurt pond-raised crawfish

Acadiana bureau

FRANKLIN — Hurricane Juan's rainfall may have been both a blessing and a curse to the 1986 harvest of pond-raised crawfish.

Larry de la Bretonne, aquaculture specialist with the LSU Cooperative Extension Service in Baton Rouge, said, the storm's rainfall will hurt the growing crawfish industry, but the question that cannot be answered now is how much damage was inflicted.

He expects the pond-produced crop to be average, at best.

Light harvesting already has begun in the basin, but harvesting will become most intense in the basin and ponds in January through March.

“What we’ve found so far is the rainfall temporarily does real good for the ponds,” he said. “It tends to temporarily add oxygen to the pond when rain falls, but on the negative side we lose the sunshine, which is a big oxygen producer.”

He said rain also tends to cloud pond water by stirring up sediments.

He said another negative effect of Juan on the pond crawfish crop was that the rainfall sent water over many levees, and that “introduced many predator fish into the ponds.”

Those fish, mainly catfish, are in for a treat, de la Bretonne said, because the crawfish are just the right size for the fish to eat.

Those predators can sometimes wipe out a pond, although the ponds are flooded at other times by farmers, and there are screens in the system to keep out the larger fish.

“Predators can sometimes eat up to 40 percent of a pond’s crop,” he said.

St. Mary Parish is one of the main crawfish producers in Louisiana.

The topping of the levees presents another problem with oxygen, de la Bretonne said.

“That covers a lot of green vegetation, and after awhile that stuff begins to rot and causes an oxygen problem, even more than if you had very low water in the pond,” he said.

He said that following Hurricane Juan the ponds were “the worst shape I’ve ever seen them in since I’ve been in the crawfish industry, and that’s been better than 20 years.”

The water in the Atchafalaya Basin will help the wild crop of crawfish, he said.

“The influx of fresh water will help, but what will happen is, if you don’t watch it, the water will come up, it will flood the crawfish out of their burrows, and the crawfish will come out,” he said.

“Once the crawfish come out, the water may recede and leave behind pools of stagnant, oxygen-depleted water,” he said.

That water condition would be caused by the vegetation and leaves blown into the water. The crawfish would be forced into these ponds, where they would either die or have slow growth.

“And then you have a real problem on your hands, because those pools may be the only water around, and we may have a dry winter,” he said.

He said that, if the water in the basin stays high all season, the crop should be a big one. If the water level drops, however, the season could be in jeopardy.

“Historically after hurricanes, we generally tend to have a good basin crop. They tend to get out of their burrows and do well, but that’s still no guarantee of a good catch this fall,” he said.