Researchers develop softshell crawfish

Two LSU professors have joined efforts to develop a system for producing softshell crawfish in commercial quantities in Louisiana.

Commercial demand for softshell crawfish has always exceeded supply, and since the crawfish could sell for as much as $8 a pound wholesale, this potential market has long been of interest to state fisheries researchers.

Now, LSU engineering professor Ronald Malone has developed a "magic cube" which, he says, has the potential to produce large quantities of high-quality softshell crawfish.

The new design has a controlled environment and can hold up to 2,000 pounds of immature crawfish. The mechanized system, which uses computers, removes softshell crawfish as soon as they molt and places them in a cold-water bath where they can remain for 12 to 18 hours without hardening.

LSU fisheries professor Dudley Culley worked with Malone to improve the system's efficiency and to develop a pond management plan that would provide a consistent supply of immature crawfish for the mechanized system.

The supply of immature crawfish is affected by the fact that there are two crawfish mating peaks during the year, one in September-October and another in February-March.

Culley wants to manage the spring mating season to be able to maintain a supply of immature crawfish throughout the summer.

Culley pointed out that the extra value of the new crop could justify the additional expenses involved in managing ponds to produce softshell crawfish.

Pilot studies indicate the best management system may be one with most of the acreage being devoted to normal hardshell crawfish production, said Culley.

One more exciting aspect of the research is that Malone's management system can be used to produce softshell blue crabs as well as crawfish.

Malone said the University is now waiting for Louisiana entrepreneurs to take the design into fullscale testing and production.

The research for the new system was funded through the LSU Sea Grant Program and the Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station of the LSU Agricultural Center. Contact: Clancy Soileau, 388-8654.