Rice-seed pesticide blamed as crawfish go belly up in field

By MARK SCHLEIFSTEIN
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NEW ORLEANS (AP) — When Al Lafosse arrived at one of his crawfish ponds in rural Acadia Parish just before Easter, he knew something was very, very wrong.

Floating at the top of the pond were thousands of dead crawfish. Admittedly it had been an unfavourable dry spring for crawfish farming, but Lafosse immediately suspected another culprit behind the disaster that had befallen his 213 acres of ponds: a new insecticide used to treat rice seed before the seed is sprayed into paddies by aircraft.

As state officials assess the damage to ponds throughout crawfish country, evidence is mounting that Lafosse is right.

In the cross hairs of scientific scrutiny is Icon, a pesticide manufactured by Rhone-Poulenc Ag Co., used to kill rice water weevils, rice stem borers and chinch bugs.

The label for containers of the pesticide warns that the chemical concoction can kill organisms such as crawfish and cautions against discharging water contaminated with the chemical into creeks or other bodies of water.

But farmers buying the treated seed see only a modified notice on the seed bag, one that does not mention crawfish or warn about disposal of contaminated water.

In Acadia and Vermilion parishes, crawfish ponds are often side by side with rice paddies. Indeed, some farmers rotate their ponds between crawfish and rice.

"I've lost at least half of my production," said Don Benoit, who grows crawfish in six ponds and also owns D and D Seafood, a distributorship in Gueydan. "We're buying crawfish every day, and we were aware of the problem pretty quickly."

Another farmer posted an e-mail message on Rhone-Poulenc's Web page bulletin board, complaining that tests had found .035 part per billion of the pesticide in one of his ponds after the crawfish died.

State Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom said it is still unclear whether all the crawfish kills attributed to Icon this spring were caused by the chemical.

But he agrees that at least some of the kills resulted from the pesticide.

"This spring's dry weather forced rice farmers to move water from one rice paddy to another after the seed was sown, and the water from those paddies then ran into ditches and bayous from which crawfish farmers drew water for their ponds," Odom said. "Agriculture Department scientists are studying whether the reused water contained elevated levels of the pesticide.

In addition, some crawfish were found to have treated rice seed in their stomachs, he said, an indicator that the treated seed drifted into some ponds when it was sown from the air.

The Agriculture Department received reports from 26 farmers and estimated the total loss at 2,800 ponds of crawfish.

Odom was concerned enough that he called a halt in the application of treated seed for three days this month.

"It's a 100-year drought that's resulted in very low water levels and very low oxygen levels in the water," Odom said.

Crawfish farmers, however, point out that last spring's dry spell, also considered a "100-year drought," was just as bad.

"And yet there were no similar crawfish kills last year, when the pesticide Furadan was being used on rice."

Furadan has been phased out by the EPA because its misuse has caused widespread bird kills.

"We're not questioning the veracity of the growers," Rhone-Poulenc spokesman Rick Rountree said.

"We're trying to do additional research on the relationship between Icon and crawfish."

Crawfish farmers say they fear the answers may come too late. Seeding of crawfish larva must begin in the fall, and if they are killed by residue from the chemical, it could force some farmers out of business, said Connie Melancon, who raises crawfish in 165 acres of ponds in Acadia Parish.

"We just want this to be resolved and go back to making a living," she said.

Al Lafosse shows off one of the select crawfish that he raises in ponds near Morse in Acadia Parish. Lafosse and other crawfish farmers in the area have experienced the loss of large numbers of crawfish in their ponds this season. A new insecticide used by rice farmers may be the cause.

Al Lafosse walks next to a crawfish pond that he drained on his farm near Morse. Thousands of crawfish were found dead in the pond and Lafosse suspects a new insecticide may be the cause.