Senate panel proposes labels for crawfish

By Mike Hasten
State Editor

BATON ROUGE - Louisiana's crawfishermen say the public has a right to know if they're being sold or served foreign crawfish that might be tainted with pollutants.

The Senate Agriculture Committee agreed Tuesday, unanimously sending Sen. Armand Brinkhaus' SB 1201 to the full Senate for debate.

"Chinese crawfish are invading the market," said Sen. Don Cravins, who handled Brinkhaus' bill in committee.

The bill proposes that crawfish sold in markets have a sticker attached informing the buyer of the crawfish's country of origin. Any restaurant that serves foreign crawfish must print on or attach a note to the menu or at least post a sign in plain sight informing customers that the crawfish is imported.

Similar bills have been attempted in past years but heavy opposition from the Louisiana Restaurant Association blocked passage.

"I guess we caught them asleep this morning," Cravins said after unanimous passage of the bill. He said he expects opposition from restaurant owners "but I think it can be worked out."

Crawfish producer Daniel Lyons of Church Point said Chinese crawfish can be sold at a lower price because labor costs are so much lower in China. They are brought into the country tariff-free and are being blended in with native crawfish.

But price competition is not the crawfishermen's only concern. Lyons said he and others are worried about polluted crawfish damaging their reputation.

Crawfish and rice farmer Frank Melancon of Church Point has documents showing the many pollutants that are found in the waterways where crawfish are harvested in China. Numerous pesticides, including Aldrin and DDT, that have been banned in the U.S. are still being used in China and are in the water. Also, many heavy metals, such as arsenic and chrome, show up in lab tests of imported crawfish.

Melancon, who also has a fish sense structure would help get a wild crawfishermen move out of his department but he doesn't want to lose the money. He says the Crawfish Promotion Board promotes all crawfish, regardless of its source.

A provision imposing a $10 fee on anyone else who catches wild crawfish is expected to be dropped when the bill is brought up again.

"We're trying to regulate ourselves," Rodrigues said, and the bill would have no effect on pond crawfishermen.

The license and fee structure would be substituted for a tax wild crawfishermen are now paying on sacks and bait but the tax would still apply to pond crawfishermen. Proceeds from the tax would fund the Crawfish Promotion Board in the Department of Agriculture.

Rodrigues said the board emphasizes pond crawfish over wild ones "so we're paying a tax to cut our own throats." The new license fees would go to the Seafood Marketing Board under Wildlife and Fisheries.

Charlie Davis of Bayou Sorrel.