Soft crawfish outlook good, specialist says

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

Louisiana's young soft shell crawfish industry is headed for another year of growth as well as increased efficiency, according to an LSU aquaculture specialist.

The number of processors is going to be higher in the coming season, which gets under way in November, and the size of production systems is going to be bigger, Ken Roberts, LSU Sea Grant Program economic specialist, told a meeting attended by about 250 people in Baton Rouge recently.

Output of production systems is going to be higher, he said.

"It means a lot of crawfish," Roberts said.

In soft shell crawfish production, crawfish are taken from ponds or the wild and held in trays of warm water until they shed their hard outer shells in the process of growing. When they shed, the soft crawfish are plucked out of the trays, chilled and frozen. In its soft state, the whole crawfish, except for two small stones that must be extracted from the head, can be cooked and eaten.

The market for soft shell crawfish is almost entirely restaurants. Few are sold at retail.

Roberts said most of the market for soft shell crawfish is out of state.

Frank Eakin, president of Handy Soft Shell Crawfish Co., which buys from producers and ships out of state and overseas, said after the meeting he does not see a major market in retailing soft shell crawfish at this time. Customers don't know the product, and home cooks don't know how to prepare it, Eakin said.

Roberts told the crawfish producers to see better packaging that will show the product better is a must. Fresh soft shell crawfish are frequently put into water in small plastic bags and frozen.

Eakin said Handy has come up with an attractive package for its product, though some will be sold in bags. The new packaging will let the cook use one crawfish at a time, rather than having to thaw a whole bag, he said.

From little commercial production three years ago, the soft shell crawfish business has pushed its way into the Louisiana aquaculture scene quickly.

One indication of the growth is formation of the National Soft Shell Crawfish Association in August.

Linton Lanclos, association president, said a number of producers felt a national association, in addition to the Louisiana Soft Shell Crawfish Association, was needed because there are now producers in Texas and Mississippi. Membership in the national association is still small, but it sponsored the recent meeting of producers, which filled a large meeting room of the Hilton Hotel. Several suppliers and buyers set up displays in the vestibule of the meeting hall.

Rouse Caffey, chancellor of the LSU Agriculture Center, gave the opening remarks. He stressed the importance of aquaculture, or water farming.

In the midst of budget cuts, Caffey said, "We're not cutting the aquaculture budget. Why? Because aquaculture is the coming thing in the state of Louisiana."

Crawfish

CONTINUED FROM 1D

better packaging that will show the product better is a must. Fresh soft shell crawfish are frequently put into water in small plastic bags and frozen.

Eakin said Handy has come up with an attractive package for its product, though some will be sold in bags. The new packaging will let the cook use one crawfish at a time, rather than having to thaw a whole bag, he said.

From little commercial production three years ago, the soft shell crawfish business has pushed its way into the Louisiana aquaculture scene quickly.

One indication of the growth is formation of the National Soft Shell Crawfish Association in August.

Linton Lanclos, association president, said a number of producers felt a national association, in addition to the Louisiana Soft Shell Crawfish Association, was needed because there are now producers in Texas and Mississippi. Membership in the national association is still small, but it sponsored the recent meeting of producers, which filled a large meeting room of the Hilton Hotel. Several suppliers and buyers set up displays in the vestibule of the meeting hall.

Rouse Caffey, chancellor of the LSU Agriculture Center, gave the opening remarks. He stressed the importance of aquaculture, or water farming.

In the midst of budget cuts, Caffey said, "We're not cutting the aquaculture budget. Why? Because aquaculture is the coming thing in the state of Louisiana."

A U.S. Department of Agriculture reported last week aquaculture in the United States has grown 20 percent a year since 1980, and that production of food fish and shellfish was worth almost $550 million at the farm in 1987.

Caffey said LSU is ready to take bids on a $2.5 million aquaculture research building.

Mike Moody, Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service nutrition specialist, said LSU is getting a $35,000 grant from the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation to study soft shell crawfish. The grant is an indication of interest in soft shell crawfish in other states, Moody said.