CLOUTERVILLE, La. (AP) — The farm of Danny and Judy Matt features the latest thing in crawfish.

Softshell crawfish — crawfish which are frozen soon after molting, before their shells can harden — have been growing in popularity. The 3-year-old industry has boomed in Louisiana, from 5,000 pounds of production in 1986 to more than 80,000 pounds last year. Producers were predicted to have a capacity of 300,000 pounds this year.

The Matts are doing their small part, expecting to produce more than 700 pounds this year. They have their own crawfish ponds, but purchased most of the crawfish used for softshell production. For softshells, Matt said buyers prefer the red crawfish, which he purchased, to the native crawfish grown in his ponds.

They have a 16-tray production line, though their water treatment system is large enough for a 40-tray system. Two of the trays are used for molting crawfish, the remainder are holding trays.

"If we can really get committed, we would bring the system up," he said.

The Matts produced softshell crawfish experimentally last year, but spent the off-season upgrading their production line with new trays and an improved water circulation system.

The upgrade paid off. They have harvested as much as 20 pounds of crawfish in a day.

"We had to go through so much expense in filters, we are doing great, but we haven't covered the expense," Danny Matt said.

The crawfish, about 26 pounds worth per tray, are fun to watch. Those newly introduced to the trays are cantankerous, fighting with one another for a place under the water sprinklers and rearing up and snapping at any threat.

As they get closer to molting the crawfish eat less and become less active. Care is taken not to allow a too-active crawfish into a molting tray; they are cannibals. Newly molted crawfish are defenseless and have a way of disappearing when non-molting crawfish are around.

Matt picked up one crawfish shortly after sprinkling food pellets in the tray. The mudbug had one pellet in its mouth and another in hand, which it quickly shoved into its mouth rather than take the chance of losing it.

The Matts check the trays twice during the day. They said the crawfish don't seem to molt at night.

Crawfish that are about to shed their skins turn dark, with the distinction between their upper and lower colors becoming less noticeable.

Another method of determining if the crawfish are ready to be placed in the molting tray is to determine their strength. As they get closer to molting, they get weaker. "If they pinch my shirt and I can pull them off, they are ready to go," Mrs. Matt said.

For every soft crawfish that comes out of the tray, an exoskeleton is removed. "If you've got some left, you know you missed one," Mrs. Matt said.

The Matts have had a more difficult time finding adequate markets to absorb all their production. For small producers such as they are, direct sales to local restaurants are the most efficient, but getting those restaurants interested in a new, and to some suspicious, product on their menus is not easy.

Mrs. Matt said some worry about eating the whole crawfish, but she said they stop eating four to five days before molting, so that their systems are purged before being frozen.

Janbon's Restaurant and Tunk's Cypress Inn, both in Alexandria, and Abe's in Shreveport have been customers. Judy Matt takes advantage of any opportunity to convince others of the quality and flexibility of softshell crawfish by visiting restaurants and providing samples of various recipes at festivals throughout central Louisiana.

The Matts have 400 pounds of softshells in their freezer and have sold about 150.

"You can hold them six to eight months in the freezer," Matt said.

"We can supply all year to any restaurant."