St. Martinville plant ready to export La. crawfish

By ERNEST S. BERNARD
Advocate correspondent

ST. MARTINVILLE - A massive building of concrete and bright red metal rises among recently mowed grass and a few remaining oaks in the mostly unused industrial park here.

The wilderness has been cleared, although the "No Picnicking" signs that warned visitors away from the inviting woodlands are still nailed to tree trunks.

The building will house Louisiana Crawfish Wholesalers, the state's latest entry into the world crawfish-marketing race. The plant begins operations within a week, receiving the first of tons of crawfish to be processed and shipped from this bayou town to other states and to Europe and Asia.

At stake is the state's leading share in a world market, with other states and nations in hot pursuit.

The 24,000-square-foot freezing and packing plant is the first industry to build in St. Martin Parish's industrial park since a division of Union Underwear opened a facility here in the early 1970s.

The four-parish 19 percent unemployment, rapidly falling tax collections and a weak property-tax base, it is a welcome addition.

Even though the plant won't employ more than about 50, "it's a very important economic boost," Parish Administrator Nathan Cormier said.

But most of the effect of this crawfish freezing and packing plant is expected to be on the state's rapidly growing crawfish industry.

"Most important is the increase and improvement in crawfish marketing, in the parish and statewide," Cormier said.

Crawfishing means $100 million a year to Louisiana, and state agricultural experts are predicting rapid growth, possibly tripling in size within the next five to 10 years.

But most of the crop about 85 percent is marketed and eaten right here in the state, said Randy Montegut, a fisheries biologist who is president of the consortium of 19 crawfish processors that owns the new plant.

If the industry is to grow, the market has to be moved out of state, Montegut said. And that's what the new facility is expected to do.

Out-of-state buyers want crawfish processed and packed to exacting standards and available regularly, marketing experts say.

"One of our continuing problems in the crawfish industry has been the lack of a plant to hold large quantities of crawfish in inventory 12 months of the year," state Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odum said in a statement recently.

The St. Martinville plant will take tail meat from 19 or more peeling plants, package it according to individual customer needs and hold it for delivery as needed.

Montegut hopes for big sales in Europe.

"The European market is open to crawfish," Montegut said. "Europeans have been eating crawfish for years, and they don't view it as bait. They view it as a gourmet food, they know what it is."

"But there's a lot of interest," Montegut said.

"It's still a little speculative," he said of trying to market crawfish on a massive scale.

The ability of the LCW plant to market U.S. government-approved crawfish on a regular basis is expected to help stabilize the crawfish industry in Louisiana, building a steady clientele of big out-of-state buyers. It also may help to keep prices of live crawfish up, helping fishermen and pond-owners, although Montegut said he isn't sure about that.

Prices sometimes fall so low that fishermen often have periods during which they have to operate at a loss, according to Greg Guirard, a fishermen's spokesman.

"The foreign and U.S. markets haven't developed the way we were told they would by the Louisiana Department of Agriculture," said Guirard, who represents two commercial fishermen's cooperatives based in St. Martin Parish.

"For example, fishermen are used to having a great demand for crawfish in Lent, and the demand is not there," he said.

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Crawfish

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is." The plant already is preparing to ship crawfish to Sweden, as "Krafta, cooked whole, pickled in brine and retailed in one-kilogram packages, Montegut said.

"The U.S. market is really not developed yet," Montegut said. "Crawfish hasn't been available. People don't know what it is."

Interest in Cajun culture and cuisine around the country has sparked Cajun restaurants and even Cajun cooking classes as far away as New York, but without a large processing and marketing effort, crawfish has been on the back burner generally unavailable, and expensive when it is.

"But there's a lot of interest," Montegut said. Crawfish has been introduced into a few areas, generally urban concentrations along the coast, just within the last four or five years, he said.

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A big selling point for out-of-state buyers, Montegut said, is the U.S. Department of Commerce's seal of approval that will be on all the meat sold by the plant.

LCW will pay the cost of inspection for the voluntary program, which works similarly to the mandatory USDA inspection of beef.

"They've already been here to inspect the facility," Montegut said. "It's a commitment to quality."

The plant also will have its own bacteriology lab.

The fat will be washed off all tail meat sold from the plant, which is unthinkable to a good Cajun cook. But non-local markets, accustomed to white meat such as lobster, aren't ready for yellowish meat, most marketers believe.

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The St. Martinville plant represents the ultimate in crawfish-processing technology. With receiving and shipping docks on opposite sides of the building to prevent contamination, and the ability to have crawfish frozen to 15 degrees below zero Fahrenheit within minutes, Montegut is confident the crawfish will be attractive and tasty.

There will be a ripple effect felt from the plant throughout the area, Montegut believes. Peeling plants, farmers, fishermen, and bait sellers and other support industries should all benefit.

"Our efforts to sell out of state are going to stimulate the market," he said. Developing Louisiana crawfish markets across the U.S. and the world is a cooperative effort, Montegut said.

"We don't necessarily view ourselves as hard competitors with other plants," he said. "If we do something right, it helps everybody."

But the state said splitting the money would defeat the purpose of the loan.

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