The State Cracks Down on Crawfish Processors Watering Down Their Packages

CONSOMERS IN ACADEIANA MAY DO WELL TO heed these words of wisdom when buying a pound of crawfish tails for etouffees and casseroles: If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Some advertised specials that seem like bargains may actually be watered down, according to the Louisiana Department of Agriculture.

The department has been investigating crawfish packages that aren’t up to advertised weights. Nearly half of the packages checked didn’t weigh what their packages said they should.

“When we find something, we stop sales and we have the company re-do the packaging,” says Melvin Lyons, who is with the Agriculture Department’s Weights and Measures division.

Both the department and the seafood industry are concerned about the increasing incidences of crawfish packaging that doesn’t measure up to the labeled weight. “They want us to get in there and clean it up,” Lyons says.

“It’s been a problem for years and years,” says Roy Robin, owner of Bayouland Seafood in Cecilia. He is in full support of efforts to monitor and control the situation. “I feel it’s a good thing to do. That way we can compete.”

The state Agriculture Department periodically inspects supermarket products to ensure that labeling laws are not being violated as to weight and contents. “We do this every year. This is a regular process,” says Robin.

During a two-week period in late February and early March, Weights and Measures checked 2,158 packages of crawfish. Of this amount, 482 percent, or almost half, weighed less than the weight listed on the package. The differences ranged from a fraction of an ounce to two ounces.

ACCORDING TO LYONS, THE PROBLEM HAS BEEN corrected in all of the cases. “We shut it down at the store and they get the processor to come back in and re-do it.”

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The investigation also revealed that 12 processors were responsible for the violations. Most of these are Acadiana businesses, although at least one is in Baton Rouge and another is located north of Acadiana, according to Larry Michaud, spokesman for the Agriculture Department.

The names of the offending processing plants could not be obtained from the Department of Agriculture, which cited the continuing nature of the investigation as its reason for not releasing them. The Times has filed a request for the information under the Public Records Act. At press time, it was still not available.

Says Michaud, “We have a legitimate investigatory position here. The margin of error is so small. Most of them are not repeat offenders. Holding them up to this would almost certainly bankrupt them.”

Michaud says most of the violations were less than one ounce, and most of the businesses involved are honorable. Releasing the information, he says, would “ruin some businesses that are trying to do a legitimate job.”

But a measurement as minute as an ounce translates into big bucks for legitimate processors. Robin figures that if his plant peels 2,000 pounds a day, one ounce of water in each package could result in 125 pounds of displaced, or extra, crawfish. This converts to $900 additional income for one day’s work. “We can’t compete with the guy who puts liquid in his meat,” says Robin.

Processors averaged $7.25 a pound last week on crawfish sales to retailers. Based on this figure, an ounce is worth roughly 45 cents on the wholesale market and considerably more to consumers. If a processor adds water, "He can sell at $6.50 and still make more money than I can," says Robin.

This is precisely why many of the most vocal complaints have come from within the crawfish industry itself. “I think the consumer should be informed. They need to be aware that there’s a lot of liquid in the bag, there’s a chance that water will have been added to it,” Robin says.

He advises the buying public to be aware of unreasonable bargains and to check the crawfish package for an unusually watery mixture. Robin cautions, however, that all bags contain some moisture, and he says only a legitimate measurement process can ascertain the true weight.

THE PROCEDURE THAT WEIGHTS and Measures uses is simple, but the weight instruments are precise and exact. Inspectors first open the bag and drain the contents into a colander device for a couple of minutes. The product is then repackaged and reweighed, subtracting the bag weight. A fat ratio of 10 percent is allowed.

In some instances, retailers will forego a profit on crawfish in order to generate traffic in the store. Robin says many of the larger chains or supermarkets use this technique, and are able to offer especially low prices. “It doesn’t necessarily mean the crawfish meat is short.”

Lyons commends the crawfish industry for its recognition of the problem and efforts to rectify it. “These people want what is correct,” he says. “The crawfish people are good people. They want to do what is right.”

Industry leaders are working jointly with agriculture officials to strengthen enforcement policies. Currently, the department has the authority to stop sales, but fines and/or penalties must be pursued through a judicial court system. This results in costly and lengthy proceedings for the local district attorney. “We don’t use it unless we have to,” Lyons says.

If the infraction was a civil violation, the Agriculture Department could levy fines and penalties itself. Such a change requires action by the Louisiana Legislature. Similar measures have failed in the past, but Michaud is hopeful that the legislation will succeed this year.

“Lys this meat should be seized and packaged under supervision,” says Robin. “It’s nothing for them [some processors] to change from one store to another.” He favors tougher penalties to alleviate short-weight problems. “It hurts the industry,” Robin says.

Lyons wants the industry and the public to realize that the situation is being monitored and that any adulteration of the product will not be tolerated. “I don’t think that the majority of the consumers are aware that we are doing this on a daily basis,” he says. “We’re not going to allow it.”