Unlocking seafood’s economic potential

By BOB ODOM
Commissioner of Agriculture

As falling oil revenues force a rethinking of the best uses for the state’s natural resources, Louisiana is beginning to unlock the enormous economic potential of the seafood in its coastal waters, says Gilbert Bane, director of LSU’s Coastal Fisheries Institute.

Two historic shortcomings have caused Louisiana citizens to realize only a small fraction of the benefits available from the vast underwater gold mine off the Louisiana coast, he says. In the past the state has not taken the raw fish product and turned it into a finished product, losing the value of the final processing to other coastal states. And fishermen have relied on the old favorites - shrimp, oysters, crabs, red snapper - for their annual income, never exploring the market potential for the scores of other fish species which thrive in the extremely fertile waters off Louisiana’s Gulf Coast.

Bane points out that Louisiana lands nearly two billion pounds of fish a year for a dockside value of some $250 million. Half of that value is in shrimp landings.

But the value of the dockside landings could be multiplied four to seven times if a Louisiana industry processed the raw product into a product ready for sale at the local supermarket. Now, the four to seven multiplier is almost all lost to other states, primarily Alabama and Florida, which process the majority of Louisiana seafood.

Although the dollar potential from additional processing is well known, the economic impact for what is known in the trade as “underutilized” species can only be guessed.

In an interview Bane reels off a long list of underutilized species -- mullet, tile fish, grouper, croaker, scad, drum, shark, flounder, jacks and many others -- found in Louisiana coastal waters which have market potential.

But one of the fish he is highest on at the moment is the butterfish. It is a classic example of something virtually unknown until recently. Discovered in a research project to determine the marketability of another underutilized species -- squid -- it is now believed that the butterfish is found in huge numbers off the coast. Additional research has shown it to be a favored fish delicacy in countries as diverse as Japan, Egypt, Nigeria, Austria and Switzerland.

A small fish averaging about a half pound, Bane said he and colleagues “found enormous concentrations of butterfish... we found so many out there that we started working on their biology and population dynamics.”

He now believes upwards of 100,000 metric tons of butterfish inhabit coastal waters, with 50,000 metric tons available for annual harvesting which could mean $100 million in income to fishermen.

The butterfish, he says, is one example of an underutilized fish immediately available to Louisiana fishermen; a species research has shown has a substantial international following and a fish that during a recent marketing trip to the Orient by Bane and others generated instant interest among seafood brokers.

With three of the four major ingredients to place to establish an entirely new seafood industry for Louisiana, all that remains is processing for the butterfish.