Vocational agriculture students get hands-on lesson in aquaculture

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CROWLEY — Robbie Marquis and Jake Dore spent first hour Thursday wading through thigh-high water in hip boots. Marquis and Dore and juniors at Crowley High School, where vocational agriculture students are getting hands-on lessons in aquaculture.

The school has a demonstration crawfish farm, maintained by a class of those enthusiastic yo-ag students. The two-acre farm is small compared to commercial operations, which can range from 40 to 400 acres.

According to Dwight Landreneau, Southwest area aquaculture agent for the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, Crowley High's farm is the only one of its kind in the state or the nation which is manned by high school students.

The pond is divided into four ponds, called cuts, the students explained. The cuts are surrounded by baffle leves which are used to keep water circulating, according to Dale Mathieu, a junior at Crowley High.

"The water zigzags around the leves," he said.

The leves have breaks in them so that the water can move freely among the four cuts and down a long canal which runs beside the cuts, he explained. A paddle wheel aerator helps keep a good supply of oxygen in the water, said Kevin Gauthreaux, another junior at the school.

"It makes the water circulate in the pond, and helps provide more oxygen," he said. "The wheel breaks the water particles up in smaller pieces, and that makes it easier for the oxygen to mix with the water. The crawfish have to have oxygen to grow."

Chad Hargrave, a senior, said the paddle wheel doesn't run every day, just when it's needed to get the water moving. Senior Robert Minix said they work in their pond every school day, except when it's raining hard.

The pond was seeded last August with rice and sorghum Sudan grass, Landreneau said, and it was flooded in October. The students and their teacher, Louis Cramer, installed the paddle wheel.

Late in October, Cramer and Landreneau met with an LSU student who did a research project on crawfish. They got 15,000 crawfish larvae from her, and used those to stock the pond, Landreneau said.

Additional crawfish were added later when an overstocked pond donated some of the animals, and more juvenile crawfish were added in January, he said.

Local companies have donated equipment and feed to the farm, he said. One company also donated the artificial bait that the students use to trap their crawfish. A test they did earlier this year indicated that pyramid-shaped traps catch twice as many crawfish as the barrel-shaped traps do, Landreneau said.

The students harvest the crawfish, then keep them in a large, partially submerged square trap for a while to purge them, he said. The students take orders for crawfish and sell them, he said. All the money goes into a fund for future projects, he said.

Because the pond operation involves so many factors, other classes will be studying crawfish farming, Landreneau said. Biology, economics and home economics classes will be using the farm in school, he said.

As for the vocational agriculture class, Cramer said his students benefit in many ways from their work on the farm.

"We see the crawfish industry is growing, and it's an important aspect of agriculture in this area," Cramer said. "If we're going to teach agriculture, we have to include aquaculture. We hope the kids will be starting out on a higher technical level when they leave here."

Landreneau said teaching the students new techniques has a wider effect.

"You teach the student these processes, and they talk to their parents. Sometimes the parents will try something new that the child learned in school," he said. "I can't always get them to try new things. But if their child learned it in school, they may try the new stuff."