Water increase may not help crawfish

By Timothy Beacham
Staff writer

BUTTE LA ROSE - Something's always hampering Acadiana's crawfish production. Whether it's a natural occurrence like scavenger birds putting a dent in the yearly crustacean population or something more active like Chinese infiltration taking more than a whack at the knees of our local processing economy, there is always something.

This year is no different in the Atchafalaya Basin as cold winter temperatures and a river that is slow to rise is keeping Procambarus clarkii (crawfish) deep inside the burrows.

Charlie Davis, president of a crawfisherman's association known as Common Claws, submitted a request to the United States Army Corps of Engineers, as well as Louisiana politicians Bennett Johnson, John Breaux, Cleo Fields and Jimmy Hayes, asking that the gates of the Mississippi river be opened and more water diverted to the basin.

Normally the basin is fed by 30 percent of the sum of the Red and Mississippi rivers. However, more can be added by manipulating the gates at the Old River Complex some 90 river miles north of Baton Rouge.

"I need two feet of water in the wood to flush the bad water out," Davis said in a telephone interview with the Advertiser Wednesday.

"If we don't flush the water out," he said.

Davis, accompanied by fellow crawfisherman Kerry Rodriguez, requested that additional water from the Mississippi be diverted into the basin to bring the level at Butte La Rose up four feet.

"Two percent more water into the basin area," Campos said.

"Four feet is beyond where we would feel comfortable," he added.

According to Campos, other things such as sedimentation and the river stage at Morgan City have to be weighed before allowing additional water to flow into the basin.

"There is a whole set of other impacts that have to be assessed," Campos said.

"If we raised the level at Butte La Rose four feet," Campos theorized, "then the river level at Morgan City would be near five feet, which is flood stage.

If the level of the river is at flood stage, then some low-lying businesses and homes could be in danger in the event of heavy rains or excessive spring thaw, Campos said.

Davis disagrees with Campos on this point saying that, "they (the Corps) could raise it to 20 feet at Butte La Rose and it wouldn't hurt Morgan City.

Davis believes the water dispersion through the vast area of the basin would keep the water spread out and the river level reasonably low further south.

Disagreements aside, the crawfish are hurting for some fresh water, according to Davis, and something has to be done.

Far from the original four foot request, the additional two percent volume will raise the level no more than seven-tenths of a foot at Butte La Rose.

Davis was a little more than disappointed by the compromise.

"If that's all they're gonna do, then they should let that water go to the pogies," Davis said.