

Crawfish farmers tap growing gourmet market

LANCASTER — Crawfish suggest fishbait — not gourmet dining — to most Americans. But it's on the plate, not on the hook, where the small, lobster-like crustacean is earning a reputation as a promising cash crop for some southern farmers.

Also known as crayfish and crawdads, crawfish thrive in freshwater lakes and swamps across the country and around the world.

While already a delicacy in France and Scandinavia, crawfish are gaining popularity as a speciality food in the U.S. Louisianans have always savored crawfish bisque or stew, but now New York, Chicago, and Cleveland have become big markets for processed crawfish tails, according to Kenneth Roberts of the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

The wild catch, which makes up about 50 to 70 percent of the total crop, is not enough to satisfy growing demand in the restaurant and food trade. Several hundred farmers in Louisiana and Texas raise crawfish in cultured ponds and rice fields, and the idea is spreading through Mississippi and South Carolina.

"Louisiana farmers harvested about 28 to 30 million pounds of crawfish last season, which ran from November 1980 to last June," says economist Michael Stellmacher of USDA's Economic Research Service. "This harvest earned them about \$25-\$29 million. Texas farmers produced an additional 3 to 4 million pounds, worth around \$5.5 million.

"There are about 60,000 pond

acres in production in Louisiana, and 4,000 to 5,000 in Texas. Both the acreage and amount of production are increasing. Ten years ago, there were less than 20,000 acres in both states combined."

Crawfish farming is part of a growing aquaculture industry fairly new to this country. About 5,000 U.S. farmers raise freshwater catfish, trout, and crawfish for commercial food use. Around 150,000 producers raise fish for recreational use — primarily to stock lakes and ponds for fishing. The farm value of all cultured fish is between \$225 and \$250 million a year, up from \$125 to \$150 million in 1977, according to Stellmacher.

"Aquaculture gives many farmers, both large and small, an alternative enterprise, enabling them to increase the income potential of their land, labor, and other resources," he says.

Raising crawfish is one way some farmers can stretch their resources. Crawfish are usually raised in ponds and are sometimes double-cropped with rice.

"Double cropping has some problems," says Louisiana's Roberts. "It requires a lot more management. Rice planting needs to be carefully coordinated with the crawfish harvest. Also, some rice land requires periodic leveling that can interrupt the crawfish cycle."

"A rotation system using crawfish, rice, and soybeans is in vogue right now," Roberts says. "Under this system, the farmer harvests crawfish every 3 crops."

Culturing crawfish in ponds is another alternative. Although not

every farmer with an idle pond on the back forty can produce crawfish, only a small acreage is needed, and farmers generally don't have to restock the pond after the first year.

Also, crawfish don't require special food. They can live on pond and pasture grass, rice, or brown-top millet.

But there are drawbacks. Crawfish need good-quality water, and a pumping system is necessary to keep the water circulating and well oxygenated. Unlike catfish, crawfish are less likely to seek out a source of good water. So, they can die off in poor water conditions.

In addition, harvesting requires a lot of labor. The wire traps used to catch crawfish must be checked every day. Some farmers with ponds pay fishermen to bring in the crop, but they may end up short of help if the wild harvest is at its peak.

Despite its shortfalls, crawfish culturing can offer producers a good return on their investment. Last season, processors paid farmers a record-high 80 to 85 cents a pound for their catch, up about a quarter from a year earlier. Texas producers received more, \$1.40 a pound, because they sold almost all their crop directly to restaurants and consumers.

Roberts estimates the cost to start a 100-acre pond system in Louisiana during 1980 was a little over \$26,000, excluding land. Each acre produces an average 600 pounds. So, at 85 cents a pound, farmers could have grossed \$51,000 in the first year. After expenses,

taxable net earnings might be around \$25,000, excluding the cost of hired labor for harvesting. Hired labor normally receives a 40-percent share of the profits. Harvest returns vary from year to year. "Prices were high in 1981 because of the drastically reduced wild catch from Louisiana's Atchafalaya Basin," Stellmacher says.

"The water level in the Mississippi River didn't rise enough last fall, and the crawfish stayed in their burrows. Prices will probably be down this season if water levels are more typical, and there's a larger wild crop. However, the market should still be strong."

There's no difference in quality or price between wild and cultured crawfish. In fact, wild stock is frequently used to stock the ponds. Prices depend on the type of market and time of harvest, and not where the fish came from. Crawfish sold to restaurants and directly to consumers generally bring higher prices than those sold to processors. Also, prices are generally highest before the wild harvest begins.

"The crawfish producers and the aquaculture industry as a whole are very optimistic right now," Stellmacher says. "But we'll have to wait and see how things turn out."

South Central PA.

goat breeders elect officers

GETTYSBURG — The South Central Pennsylvania Dairy Goat Association celebrated its annual Christmas Party together with the Adams County 4-H Dairy Goat Club Wednesday, December 12, at the Adams County Extension Service Offices.

Following a covered-dish supper, elections were held for 1982 officers of the SCPDGA. Dana Holder of Fairfield was elected President. Vaughn Solomon of Orrtanna was elected Vice-president. Vickie Mowery of Shippensburg was re-elected to a fourth term as Secretary. Fred Keller of Gettysburg was elected

Treasurer. Donna Forsman was named Publicity Director. Steve Valenzisi was chosen as Program Coordinator and re-elected to a second year as Ag Council Representative, with Vertis Bream and Vaughn Solomon being chosen as Alternates.

The Association meets at 7 p.m. on the third Wednesday of each month at the Adams County Extension Offices on Route 30, west of Gettysburg. The January 20th meeting will feature a talk on "Heredity and Selecting Traits" by Dr. Lee Majeskie. Everyone interested in dairy goats is invited to attend.



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