



Lagniappe

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The Business of Louisiana Alligator – Part One: From Rice to Gators *From Louisiana Seafood News*

The farmland around Abbeville, La., is rich, fertile and wet – ideal for growing rice. The neighboring farms that border the Sagrera family land here are filled with acre after acre of rice paddies, but not one grain of it is cultivated on their land. That’s because the Sagrera family gave up growing rice more than 25 years ago in favor of a more carnivorous crop – alligators, “harvesting” thousands of them every year.



Alligator hatchlings. Photo credit: Mark Shirley

“My dad was a rice farmer in the mid-1980s,” said Craig Sagrera, who owns Vermilion Gator Farm with his father Wayne and three brothers – Stephen, Kevin and Raphael. “In high school, he started trading fur and alligator skins with his dad. He had all the contacts on how to sell alligator skins, so the state approached him about a program it had started to raise and sell gators. It took three years of convincing before my father finally agreed.”

What started with 500 gators on a rice farm now has grown to an international operation, raising more than 75,000 alligators a year. “We raise farm alligators 12 months out of the year,” Sagrera explained. “We shut down for one month in September during wild-alligator season, which is a lot of labor.”

Mother Nature determines how many alligators are raised on the south central Louisiana farm. Eggs are collected in the wild marshlands. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries gives marshland owners an allotted number of alligator eggs each year to sell. Growers, such as Sagrera, compete for the eggs and lock in contracts.

“My job is to negotiate with the land owners who sell the eggs. Once we have a contract, we fly the marshes with helicopters to find and GPS the gators nests,” said Sagrera. Once the location of each nest is mapped, the eggs are collected. After incubating for 65 to 70 days, a gator grower notifies the state exactly how many eggs hatched. “This year was a great year, as far as rainfall and salinity,” he said. “We had some record laying in our area, which means more eggs that I can collect to reach my quota. If it is a very salty or dry year, egg production can drop as much as 95 percent.”

A storm surge occurred right before egg collection started in mid-June. High water caused the loss of thousands of eggs and destroyed numerous nests, resulting in a loss of more than 10,000 eggs for Sagraera alone. The state lost about 80,000 to 100,000 of the estimated 350,000 eggs scheduled for picking. "Last year, egg production was even lower due to drought conditions and a high salinity in the marsh. Even with the eggs lost this year, we are still ahead of the previous year."

The mid-June storm surge proves why the alligator-harvesting program is such a success, said Sagraera, president of the Louisiana Alligator Farmers and Ranchers Association. "Let's just say there are 100 eggs out in the wild. If I don't mess with them, only five percent of them will hatch and live."

That's a high-mortality rate for baby gators hatched in the marshlands. If Sagraera collects them, however, he estimates 85 out of 100 eggs will hatch and live. "I will make my revenue on them. The landowner will make some money. And then, I put 12 percent of my hatched eggs back into the wild from March to August." Sagraera and other alligator farmers make a living from animals that normally would die from high water, predators or harsh environmental conditions.

"The alligator farmer provides feed and care for the baby alligator for the first year of life when he reaches four feet," explained Mark Shirley of Louisiana State University (LSU) Agricultural Center (AgCenter) and Louisiana Sea Grant. "The wild population is compensated for whatever eggs the farmers pick up," Shirley said. "More than enough babies are put back in order to compensate Mother Nature."

Four feet is an important number for gator farmers. A four-footer is big enough to be released back into the wild or harvested for skin and meat. "At that size, you empty your farm every year and so you can refill it," said Sagraera.

Vermilion Gator buys and processes around 8,000 of the 35,000 alligators harvested state-wide during the wild season. Sagraera believes in buying only what he can process at his high quality standards. Switching from agriculture to alligators may not be for everyone, but it's certainly proved productive and profitable for the Sagraera family.

By Ed Lallo and Springfield Lewis/Louisiana Seafood News

Elmer's Island Remains Closed to the Public

Elmer's Island, a wildlife refuge owned and maintained by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), remains closed to the public. Ongoing oiling conditions as a result of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill necessitate continued cleanup of remobilized and uncovered oil mats and tar balls.

The 230-acre tract of barrier beachfront, which is located on the southwestern tip of Jefferson Parish, will remain closed to the public until further notice.

LDWF Launches Oyster Refrigeration Program First Phase of Department's Seafood Technology and Equipment Program

LDWF launched the first phase of the Seafood Technology and Equipment program, designed to aid the seafood industry in upgrading current equipment. In this first phase, the department will assist oyster vessel owners in purchasing refrigeration equipment. Participants in the program can qualify for 50 percent of their eligible refrigeration costs, up to \$10,000.

Oyster refrigeration is an important component of the Department's Louisiana Wild Seafood Certification Program, launching this fall. Passed by the Louisiana Legislature in 2010, the program authorizes the department to establish a voluntary certification program for Louisiana wild seafood. Through the program, the department hopes to create a more professional industry, better handling practices and a more consistent, quality product.

"We are pleased to be able to provide these critical funds to members of the Louisiana Oyster Industry. Advanced refrigeration equipment onboard vessels will help in our efforts to produce high-quality seafood products," said LDWF Assistant Secretary Randy Pausina. "While this is a significant step forward for the industry, we understand that these funds are not enough. We continue to explore every available resource to direct additional funds toward this program and intend to create similar programs for other Louisiana fisheries."

The department is prioritizing the oyster industry in their assistance efforts based on an emergency rule that went into effect in May, changing the way oysters can be harvested. The new rule places restrictions on the amount of time it takes to refrigerate restricted-use products. This program will provide assistance to oyster fishermen in adhering to the new requirements.

Eligible Equipment: Refrigeration units, cooler boxes, generators and other equipment associated with refrigeration are eligible for this program. LDWF will evaluate all equipment as a complete system to ensure it will meet the refrigeration needs of the vessel. New equipment and currently installed equipment that was purchased beginning Jan. 1, 2010 will be eligible for reimbursement provided it meets the programs requirements. New equipment to be installed must be approved prior to purchase.

Application Process: To apply for this program, contact South Central Planning and Development Commission (SCPDC) to request an application.

SCPDC, P.O. Box 1870, Gray, LA 70359

Toll-free #1-800-630-3791

Local # 985-655-1051

Priority will be given to vessels with refrigeration equipment installed prior to Oct. 1, 2012. This week LDWF will send letters to vessel owners it could identify as meeting this priority qualification. The

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deadline to submit applications to receive this priority is Jan. 15, 2013. Applications submitted after Jan. 15, 2013 will continue to be accepted on a first-come, first-serve basis. As funding becomes available, approved applicants will be notified on how to proceed with the purchase and installation of equipment.

GULF OF MEXICO REGULATIONS

Proposed Rule Withdrawn to Require TEDs in Certain Shrimp Trawls

Based on new data collected this summer, NOAA is withdrawing a proposed rule to require turtle excluder devices (TEDs) for skimmer trawls, pusher-head trawls and wing-net trawls in the southeast shrimp fisheries. NOAA observers collected data that showed the devices may not prevent small sea turtles from being caught in nets as previous data suggested. The proposed rule would have affected 2,600 fishermen and had not yet taken effect.

TEDs are very effective at allowing turtles to escape from otter trawl nets operating offshore, but the device may need to be modified to work effectively for the inshore trawl fisheries. Typically, skimmer trawls fish in shallow areas where they tend to encounter smaller, young turtles, while otter trawls fish in both shallow and deeper waters so on average they tend to encounter larger turtles.

NOAA fishery observers found that turtles captured in skimmer trawls are so small that they are not necessarily able to escape through the TED door. Instead, the smaller turtles can pass through the bars of the TED and get caught inside the end of the net, potentially causing them to drown rather than allowing them to escape as intended. During the observed period, all of the turtles were released alive with one turtle assumed dead following release due to its behavior on the boat.

“We’re not abandoning this issue, there’s just more work that needs to be done to get it right,” said Roy Crabtree, southeast regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries. “This is the first time we’ve required observers on skimmer trawls and the information we now have suggests the conservation benefit does not justify the burden this rule would place on the industry. We need more research looking at different options.”

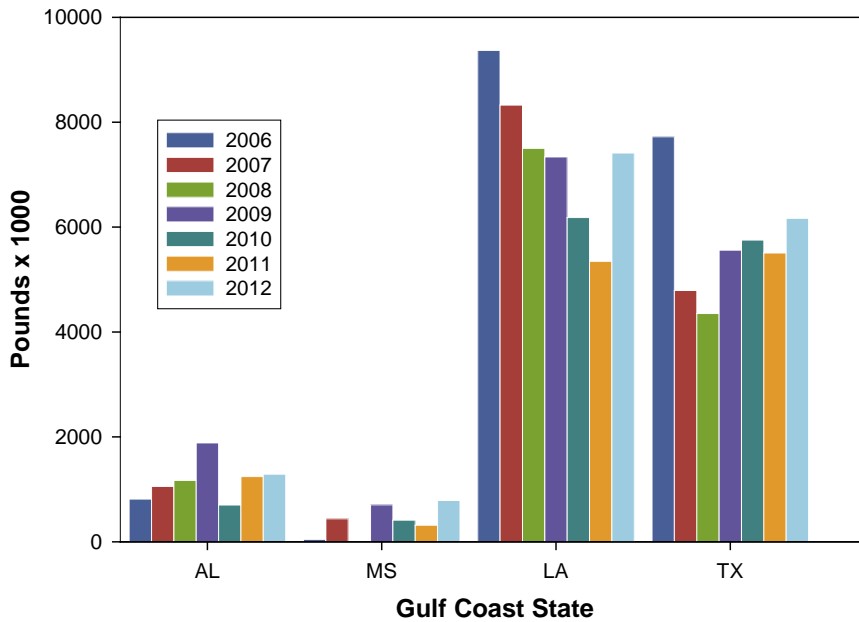
While TEDs have been required in otter trawls for more than 20 years, fishermen using skimmer trawls, pusher-head trawls and wing-net trawls are authorized to use tow time limits instead to help prevent incidental catch of turtles. Limiting the amount of time a net is pulled underwater is one way to reduce impacts of shrimp trawls on sea turtles, as most turtles can survive for up to an hour or more underwater. Historically though, compliance with tow times may be low and is hard to enforce – which was one of the reasons for the proposed rule.

As part of adopting future science-based management measures, fishery managers will continue to research turtles captured in skimmer trawls and increase outreach to the shrimp industry, focusing on education and compliance with tow times.

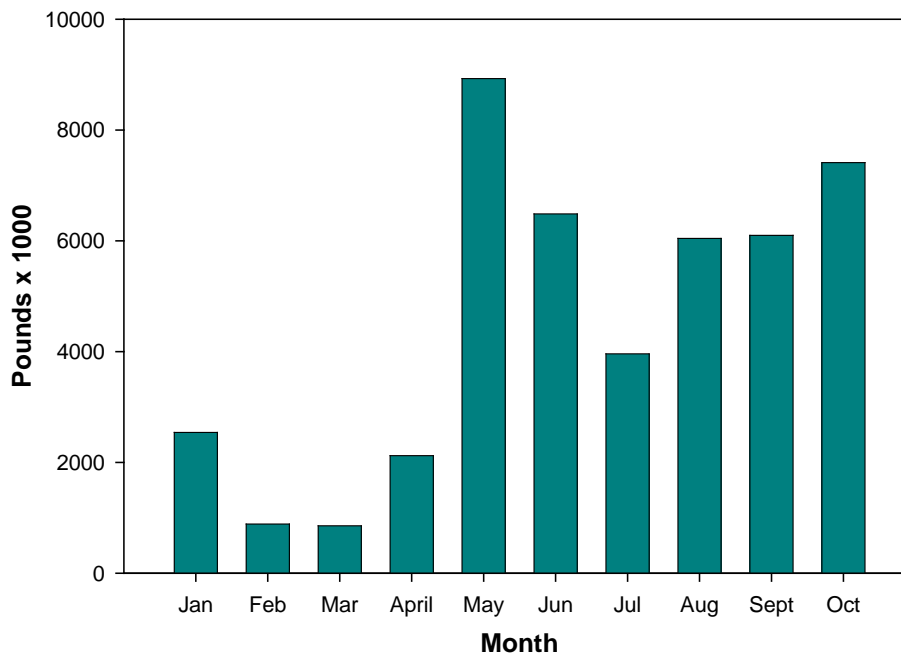
Louisiana Shrimp Watch

Louisiana specific data portrayed in the graphics are selected from preliminary data posted by NOAA on its website. All data portrayed are subject to final revision and approval by NOAA. Shrimp landings are ex-vessel prices, inclusive of all species harvested. Missing, inadequate or withheld reports are portrayed as “zero” in these graphics. Price graphics reflect central Gulf states only (Texas and Florida are reported independently). For more information, please refer to: www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st1/market_news/index.html.

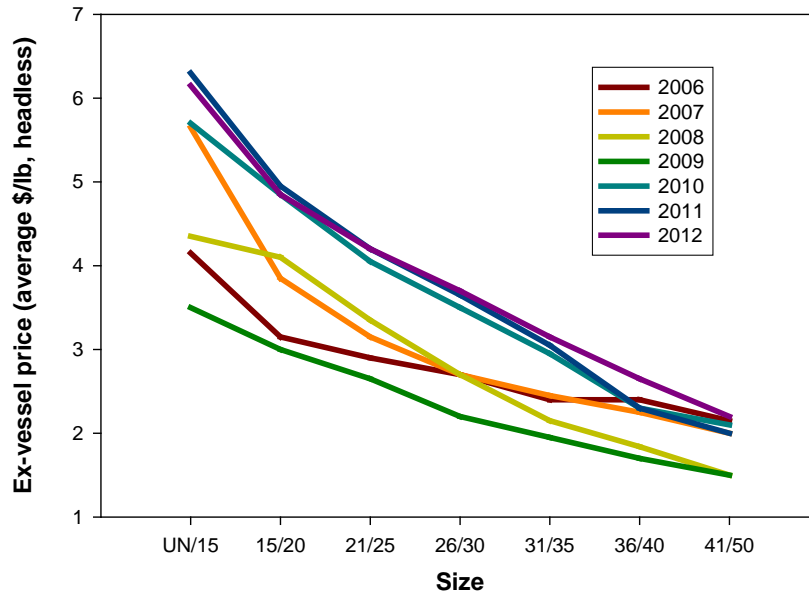
October Shrimp Harvest



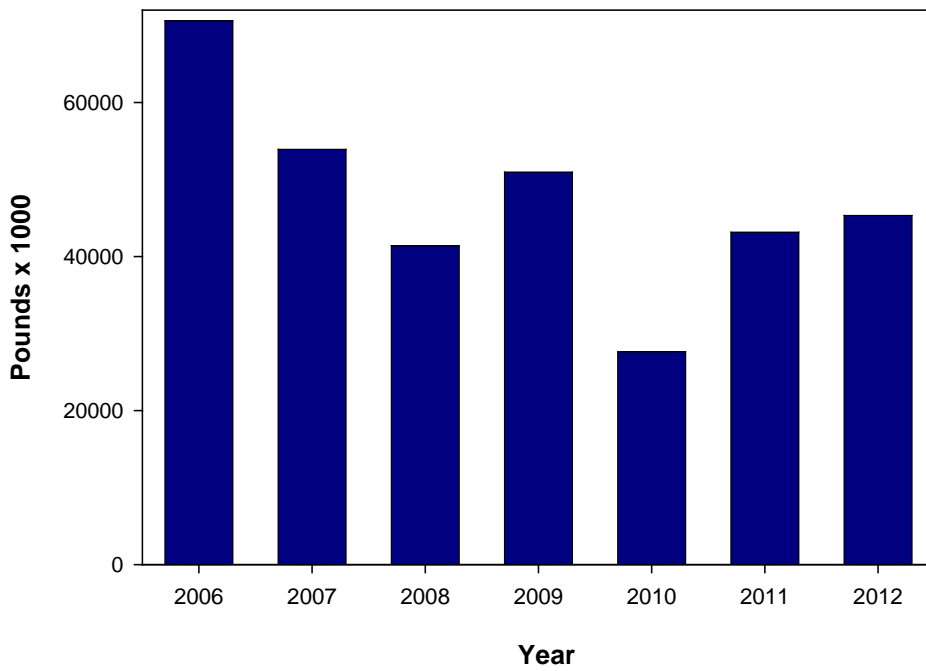
Louisiana 2012 Shrimp Harvest



October Northern GoM Shrimp Prices



Louisiana Year to Date Shrimp Harvest



The Gumbo Pot

Recipe courtesy of *Louisiana Kitchen* and Jyl Benson, Our Kitchen & Culture LLC. For more recipes or to subscribe to their magazine or free newsletter, visit <http://louisiana.kitchenandculture.com/>

Shrimp and Andouille Pot Pie

Ingredients:

- 1 sheet frozen puff pastry (half of 16-ounce package all-butter puff pastry or half of 17.3-ounce package regular puff pastry), thawed
- 1/2 cup heavy whipping cream
- 2 tablespoons all purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 3 1/2 cups sliced leeks (white and pale green parts only; from 3 large)
- 1/2 pound Andouille sausage, cut into scant 1/2-inch cubes
- 2 large garlic cloves, minced
- 1/3 cup dry vermouth or dry white wine
- 1 1.5-ounce package concentrated classic seafood stock (such as Glace de Fruits de Mer Gold) mixed with 2 cups water; or 2 cups bottled clam juice
- 1/4 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 8-ounce Yukon Gold potato, peeled, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 1/2 cup chopped green onions
- 1 1/2 pounds deveined peeled uncooked jumbo shrimp, cut into 1-inch pieces



Photo credit: Louisiana Kitchen and Culture

Method:

Preheat oven to 400°F. Roll out pastry on floured surface to 12-inch square. Cut out four 5 1/2-inch rounds. Place on parchment-lined baking sheet; bake until golden, about 15 minutes. Cool on sheet. Can be made 1 day ahead. Wrap airtight and store at room temperature.

Preheat oven to 400°F. Whisk cream and flour in small bowl. Melt butter in large skillet over medium heat. Add leeks and sauté until tender, about 10 minutes. Add andouille and garlic and sauté 4 minutes. Add vermouth; simmer until liquid evaporates, about 3 minutes. Add seafood stock mixture and thyme. Bring to simmer. Add potato and green onion and cook uncovered until potato is tender, about 6 minutes.

Add cream mixture to skillet; stir. Simmer until sauce thickens and boils, about 3 minutes. Reduce heat. Add shrimp; simmer until just opaque in center, about 3 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

Divide hot filling among four 1 1/4-cup baking dishes. Top each with pastry round. Bake until filling bubbles, about 5 minutes.

If you have a favorite seafood recipe that you would like to share, please send it to Julie Anderson janderson@agcenter.lsu.edu for inclusion in future issues.



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We would like to hear from you! Please contact us regarding fishery questions, comments or concerns you would like to see covered in the Lagniappe. Anyone interested in submitting information, such as articles, editorials or photographs pertaining to fishing or fisheries management is encouraged to do so.

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