

CROSSING A CRAWFISH POND

Understanding the effects of your project

BY GREG SPICER

If you perform right of way land services to lay a pipeline or run an electrical transmission line in Southwest Louisiana or Southeast Texas, you are likely going to have to cross a few crawfish farms. After all, the crawfish is the official crustacean of Louisiana. And crawfish are not just a Cajun delicacy and dinnertime staple—they're also at the center of a thriving business. Crawfish farming is a form of "aquaculture." In fact, Louisiana farmers yielded 127.5 million tons of crawfish in 2016, with a "farm-gate" value of \$172 million annually. In Louisiana, there are 225,789 acres devoted to crawfish aquaculture.

In order to successfully cross a crawfish farm, you need to understand what a crawfish farm is, how your project will affect that farm and how to compensate the crawfish farmer for his damages due to loss of crop and property damages. Of course, before you even set foot near (never in) a crawfish pond, you need to do three important things: get some good rubber boots for the mud, make sure you pronounce the farmer's name correctly and make sure you call those crustacean by their correct name (not crayfish, crawdaddies, or fish bait).



What is a Crawfish Pond?

Crawfish are grown in shallow earthen ponds, which are eight to 24 inches deep and mimic the natural habitat of crawfish with seasonal flooding and drying. These ponds are relatively flat and easily drained, with suitable levees that allow for production, harvesting and management of vegetation. The soil must have sufficient clay to hold water and accommodate burrowing of crawfish. These ponds are flooded in the fall and drained in the spring due to the oxygen demands for decaying vegetation, which is the food source for crawfish (the “forage crop”). The equipment needed for culturing crawfish include irrigation systems, harvesting equipment (specialized boats, traps and sacks) and agricultural implements to establish the forage crops and maintain levees.

There are two major types of production strategies: monocropping and crop rotation. Monocropping is when crawfish are the sole crop harvested from the land and production typically occurs in the same location for several production cycles or longer. The second and most common production strategy is the “crop rotation” system, in which rice (and sometimes soybeans or other crops) are raised in rotation with the crawfish. Crawfish may be cultured in two crop rotation systems: the rice-crawfish-rice system and the rice-crawfish-fallow/soybean system. The crawfish crop will almost always follow the rice harvest. One advantage of the crop rotation approach is that the farmer can get two crops out of his field in the same year.

Getting Through the Field

Inevitably, as the right of way land agent, you will be asked by your client if they can get

through a farmer’s field with their construction project without having to pay for crop damages. The short answer to this question is – probably not! Most farmers are continually cropping their fields. Because of this, it can be tricky coordinating construction schedules to avoid the crops. From March to July, the farmer will grow his rice crop in water (flooded fields). In June, he will seed his crawfish in the rice field. Then later in July to August, he will drain the water from the fields and harvest the rice. By September to October, the old rice field is re-flooded and it becomes a crawfish pond. From November to July of the following year, the crawfish are harvested. Finally, the farmer will drain, plow and level his field to repeat the process.

Your best window of opportunity for construction is when the farmer decides to keep the field fallow during the months of July through October (instead of a second crop). During this time, when the farmer would normally drain, disc and re-level the field, construction would cause the least amount of harm to his crop production. However, if a second crop was planned by the farmer,

then the entire crop would have to be purchased so the field could be drained and dried in preparation of construction or pipe installation.

The kicker is that in order to have a dry field for construction in the spring of the year (when your construction contractor likes to construct), the farmer would not be able to produce a rice crop or restock his crawfish (May-July), resulting in having to pay for the loss of an entire crawfish crop in addition to the rice crop. The best-case scenario would be that the farmer had adequate stock of crawfish remaining in the field prior to draining and construction is completed on his property prior to August when he plants vegetation.

Dr. Ray McClain with the LSU Agricultural Center has performed research suggesting that the pipeline could be installed in the fall after the rice is harvested. If the farmer can re-flood by January, then there may only be a 50 percent loss to the crawfish crop.

I would suggest that you discuss with your client the timeframe for construction of the project and its effect on crop damages well ahead of time and certainly before



approaching the crawfish farmer. If the crawfish farmer takes his field out of production based on your projected construction timeline and that timeline later changes, you will most likely have to purchase that crop *and* another crop rotation when construction actually occurs.

Paying for Damages

The cost of crop damages is usually much higher than the cost of the right of way or easement. Because crawfish are often a “cash” crop, many crawfish farmers are reluctant to provide you their yield or sales data on their crawfish production. The LSU Agricultural Center has basic yield and economic data on crawfish production on which you can base your crop damage payments. The average yield for crawfish, depending on whether it is continuous production or crop rotation, can vary from 800 lbs. to 1200 lbs. per acre. In addition to crop damages resulting from construction, there is also the potential for payment of damages to the crawfish farmer’s land and farming operations. Damages to the drainage, irrigation, levees and roads are the most common and expensive. Mitigation of these damages can be accomplished by utilizing an Agricultural Landowner



Questionnaire during the early access/survey permission phase of the project. The information the land agent needs to obtain includes:

DRAINAGE

- What drainage will be affected by the construction route? Consider both natural and farm drainage.
- Is there a need for rerouting drainage during construction to prevent interference with additional acreage on the farm?
- Location of drainage culverts, including type and size.
- Location of erosion controls structures, such as pipe drops and weirs.
- What fields drain into the affected land and how many acres are affected?

IRRIGATION

- Is there an above ground irrigation ditch or an underground irrigation pipeline?
- Is the land precision leveled and what percent of slope?
- Was the land laser leveled and who did it?
- Cost per acre to level in the past.

LEVEES AND ROADS

- What levee and field roads will need repair after construction is complete?
- Is there a need to reroute access roads to prevent interference of operation?
- Will field roads used need limestone applied for access?

It works best when the land agent uses a large aerial map with the pipeline or project route. Have the farmer mark the location of drainage and irrigation structures, as well as the direction the fields drain.

Educate Your Client

It is important and useful to educate your client early in the project on what damages and amounts they can reasonably expect to pay. This helps your client budget and have reasonable expectations of project costs. The amount of damages paid can be greatly influenced by historical payments by prior projects, the number and identity of “influential” landowners along the project route and the timing of construction and crop cycles affected. Construction methods, such as double ditching with soil separation, can prevent future problems and damages. Suggest to your client that they utilize a certified Louisiana or Texas crop consultant who is familiar with the area.

Parting Thoughts

Crawfish farmers are the most interesting and intelligent business people you will talk to while standing in the mud. Ask questions and learn about their business!

You probably will not be able to reach a farmer by telephone during planting and harvest season. Get in your truck and drive out to the field. The farmer will be more willing to climb off their tractor or out of the boat to talk to you. After all, you are in the farmer’s “office” now! 🚗



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