Opening of North Louisiana meat processing plant marks start of new agriculture industry in state

By DICK WRIGHT
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If you’re driving a Louisiana country road and see a sign that warns “Ostrich Crossing,” it’s probably a joke. But the joke stops there. Ostriches and emus are serious business in Louisiana.

Raising these large exotic birds is well established and growing in Louisiana and the nation. A U.S. Department of Agriculture publication reported there is at least one ostrich farm in every state.

Ostrich farming took an important step beyond the buying and selling of chicks and adult breeding stock recently.

A group of ostrich growers officially opened an ostrich processing plant at Sikes in Winn Parish, Nov. 3. It is a part-time operation at this point.

Commissioner of Agriculture and Forestry Bob Odom pronounced the plant “the beginning of a new agriculture industry in Louisiana.”

Five of the ostriches sent to the plant on opening day came from the East Baton Rouge Parish ostrich and emu farm of Gwen and Randy Berthelot.

The Berthelots became ostrich and emu growers four years ago. They said they spent about $50,000 for chicks and year-old birds to get started. “Everyone said, What are you going to do with those birds,” Randy said.

They said they have done very well with those birds and are able to report annual sales in six figures.

Randy works for Exxon. Gwen quit an Exxon job to run their “Bayou Longnecks” farm off Greenwell Springs Road, where they and their children, Lauren and Kevin, live.

Industry evolution

Opening the Sikes plant was a new step for ostrich raising as an end-product business because it has consisted mainly in buying and selling chicks and breeding pairs.

Prices of chicks and older birds for breeding can run high.

A number of ostrich and emu growers quoted price ranges for birds. A good breeding pair of ostriches brings $20,000 to $30,000, and chicks sell for $5,000 a pair, said one grower. Another said a good breeding pair of ostriches can bring...
Fastrunners, emus occasionally break into high-stepping gallops in their pens at the Berthelots' farm. Follow the leader...