Alligator farmer expects big surge in producers

By PAUL KEDINGER
Editor

A big surge in alligator farming may, within a few years, outdistance the world market for the prized skins, Steele McAndrew told members of the Rotary Club here Tuesday.

When McAndrew established his alligator farm, Louisiana Alligator Industries, north of Ville Platte in 1982, his breeding operation was one of only three in the state. Last year, 14 alligator farms were breeding and selling skins to the same markets which buys the harvest of reptiles from the wild.

Forty new alligator farms, according to McAndrew, are expected to open next year. Those new operations will be competing for a relatively small market which buys approximately 150,000 alligator skins a year. Africa produced 50,000 skins for the world market.

It's projected that, next year, Florida will supply an additional 30,000 skins as it relaxes restrictions on what was once an endangered species. That new source combined with a push by the Louisiana Department of Agriculture for aquaculture, said McAndrew "may cause some problems."

In addition to commenting on market conditions, McAndrew also described how he first entered the business with hatching stock provided by the state.

"I started with 754 alligators," the LSU agribusiness graduate explained. Of those 140 are now used as breeding stock. "The others are now belts and boots," he joked.

The operation now produces over 1,000 alligators a year and carries the animals from the egg to the processing room. (See Alligator farmer - Page 3A)
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"It's a labor intensive operation," said McAndrew. The reptiles are housed in an 88-degree building from the time they hatch until they reach market size of four to six feet in length during their second and third year. They are fed a daily diet of ground meat, which most often is nutria meat, after which they and their tray-style cages are washed down.

McAndrew explained the meat is ground to ease the task of feeding and to avoid fighting between the reptiles. The farm-bred animals grow to an average length of 30 to 36 inches in the first year, and are close to six feet between the 36th and 48th month.

McAndrew labeled reports that alligators grow a foot a year in the wild as a myth. "In the wild, they hibernate half a year, and don't grow during that time," he said.

The alligator produces between four and five pounds of filets, said McAndrew, with much of that sold to out-of-state buyers in Boston, California and Texas. He told Rotarians that some of the meat was used by the Jungle Dinner Club where the club meets weekly.

"Much of the rest of the country still thinks the alligator is endangered," he commented, "so much of the country boycotts the meat."