Alligator farmer finds business can be challenge during recession

By CAROL MOORMANN

KAPLAN—A dig and about 3,000 alligators live in Floyd LeMaire's back yard. The dog is a pet. The alligators are his livelihood.

Behind the nondescript bungalow-style home on Sea Drive is the "Bo Jo" Gator Farm.

The name originated from LeMaire's nickname "Bo Jo."

LeMaire started the farm in 1987, after back surgery the previous year kept him from returning to his job as a heavy machinery operator.

"It's a very expensive business to get started in," LeMaire said of alligator farming. "Most of the money goes to pay off the bank loans."

He said prices have been challenging during recession.

"People can't afford luxury items such as leather right now," he said. "A lot of people are going to lose their businesses and homes."

LeMaire, 44, has tried to lighten up his operation. He already owned work force that has been reduced to two, including Barbara and sons Chad, 16, and Cole, 8.

LeMaire said he raises alligators for slaughter.

"If you try to pull your hand out of his mouth, then that's when it's bad. Those teeth are just like razors, and they can hurt anybody. They are in understanding when it comes to the alligators."

"Two or three of them complained about the smell, but no one else has said anything," LeMaire said. "None of them have ever gotten loose. They can't hurt anybody. They are in buildings."

What concerns LeMaire is the financial outlook. He said prices have slumped because of overproduction.

When he began, LeMaire said, he had the 130 alligator farm in the state.

"I've only been bitten once, and it wasn't too bad. I wasn't paying attention, and I stuck my hand into a gator's open mouth. It bit two of my fingers, and I just left them in there until he opened up again," LeMaire said.

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LeMaire's neighbors have been understanding when it comes to the alligators.

"Two or three of them complained about the smell, but no one else has said anything," LeMaire said. "None of them have ever gotten loose. They can't hurt anybody. They are in buildings."

Wallace Sagrera, who leases the 130 alligator farm in the state, said his business has been challenging during recession.

"Prices for alligator skin range from $20 to $25. Herpin said the tourist season begins with the gathering of eggs in the marshes. The video should be ready in about a year and should sell for $25 to $30, she said."

"We're trying to promote our local existing industry," Herpin said. "We will be doing year-round tours whenever they are requested. We are his (LeMaire's) agent. We pay him, so he goes on his property."

"People can't afford luxury items such as leather right now," he said. "A lot of people are going to lose their businesses and homes."

LeMaire said group tours consist of at least 15 people, and prices range from $20 to $30. Herpin said the tour will include watching a video now in production that begins with the gathering of eggs in the marshes. The video should be ready in about a year and should sell for $25 to $30, she said.

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