Catfish: Ugly beast is beauty to St. Landry

By MIKE HASTE
State Editor

BATON ROUGE — To some, a catfish is an ugly, slimy creature created in one of God's nightmares. But to a group of entrepreneurs, scientists and formerly unemployed people in St. Landry Parish, they're beautiful.

St. Landry has become the home of the world's largest integrated aquaculture system, Aquaculture Technologies, Ltd. In other words, the company has turned fishing into farming.

Catfish and crawfish farms are common in many parts of the south, but ATL's facilities are unique in that it will research, breed, grow, harvest and market its products basically from one locale. From its current Mississippi facilities, ATL markets its products worldwide under the brand name Le Topper, with primary emphasis on restaurants.

Former Lafayette restaurateur Billy Jacobs, the company's director of product development, says Louisiana-grown products such as fresh and frozen fish, smoked fish, fish boulettes whole crawfish, crawfish tails and softshell crawfish will appear on supermarket shelves in late summer.

Gov. Buddy Roemer toured the still-developing facility just south of Lebeau Tuesday and said he is "impressed" with the massive development. "What I saw today confirms my greatest expectations."

More than $10 million has been invested in the facility which, once completed, will include production and experiment facilities south of Lebeau and a processing and packaging plant in Port Barre.

Unlike some other recent plant developments, the state has allocated no funds directly to ATL. It has, however, shared technology and manpower from LSU, with the company, in turn, contributing to LSU research.

Several jobs have been created by the location of the facility in financially strapped St. Landry Parish and Roemer says he expects hundreds to be created by the time the facility goes into full production this spring.

Currently, about 25-30 people are employed by the company.

Rep. Armand Castille, in whose legislative district the facility exists, said the plant is "a godsend to St. Landry Parish... It's done a lot for attitude because we know we have something that's coming and it helps us out of the doldrums."

Sen. Armand Brinkhaus said he and Castille have brought in numerous state agencies in an effort to assist the company.

When the processing plant is opened in Port Barre, about 200 employees are expected to be added, which Brinkhaus says will boost the local economy. Eventually, the company expects to employ over 1,000 at the plant, according to Simone Palmer.

Jack Summers, chief executive officer of ATL, said 50 million pounds of fish are expected to be processed when the facility begins full operations.

Greg Lutz, genetic specialist, said the company is "in a unique position to make a lot of genetic improvements in a hurry."

Channel catfish are utilized because "it is a very forgiving animal, very hardy, fast growing," Lutz said. Blue catfish are being experimented with but "generally they don't take handling as well and they don't take stress quite as well. We have here at ATL go out of our way to keep our fish from being stressed anyway."

Included in the layout are 20 one-acre research ponds to evaluate different strains, as well as over 190 production ponds.

ATL has enough brood stock to produce 30 million fry this spring, but most of the 7 million fish now in the ponds are from 4 to 12 inches long. They grow to prime marketing size of about two pounds in 18 months. The first harvesting, which will occur daily, will begin in April.

"Within the next five years, we fully expect to have 12,000 acres under water," Lutz said.

Lutz came to Louisiana in 1980 and earned a masters and a doctorate in genetics at LSU. He says he can't believe no one has capitalized on aquaculture in the state.

"I am perplexed," he said. "It's the perfect climate, it's the perfect soil, it's the perfect groundwater and we've got people on background in fisheries and agriculture throughout the state. There's no reason we can't be the leader in the nation."

ATL is working with LSU agricultural experiment stations on developing redfish and speckled trout production in ponds. Also, experiments are being conducted on the commercial production of hybrid striped bass in some of the many ponds on the 2,200-acre facility.

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