Catfish Farming Called 'Another Good Cash Crop'

By DON LEWIS

Catfish farming, virtually unheard of just eight years ago, has grown into an estimated $35 million a year business in the United States, an authority in the field said here.

C. H. "Neil" Block, national president of the Catfish Farmers of America, made that assertion during an interview Friday at the Jung Hotel.

Block, of Tunica, Miss., and several hundred other catfish farmers, allied tradesmen and fish scientists from 35 states attended the group's fifth annual convention and trade show which began Thursday and ended Saturday.

To illustrate the dramatic growth of the industry which caters to those who enjoy eating the old Southern delicacy, Block said: "In 1965 there were 2,500 acres in production of catfish. And at this time—at the end of 1972—there are 65,000 acres in catfish production."

Active in the catfish-raising business since 1966, Block said he has 250 acres of ponds, about 10 per cent of the land on his north Mississippi spread. "In my operation," Block said, "I feel like it's another good cash crop." Besides catfish, he also raises cattle, cotton and soybeans.

While catfish farming has grown tremendously since 1965, Block said, "This business has stabilized a good bit in the last few years in that the men who are still in catfish farming are good businessmen" and not "quick buck artists" who infiltrated the industry in its early years.

"A lot of people got into this business thinking it was a fast dollar and a lot of them have gotten out of the business," Block said. "But the men who made the capital investment to get into it and are in it now are real businessmen and they're doing a good job and they're making a profit," he added.

"The leading catfish farming states, at this time, are Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana, in that order," Block said.

Assuming a man already owns the land, Block said the cost of pond construction averages out to about $500 an acre.

Block said he thinks that to make a "legitimate profit" on his investment, a catfish farmer needs at least 100 acres of ponds. "But," he said, "there are men in this business . . . who have a good bit less than that and they are making a profit. You can make a profit on any sized pond if it is well-managed."

Commercial catfish are raised in man-made, fresh-water lakes with all the water pumped in from wells, Block said. The fish are fed a specially prepared diet—a high protein pellet—and the meat produced is "a real delicacy," he said.

The taste is quite unlike the wild North American catfish which can have a muddy or musty taste, Block said. And while the wild catfish can reach more than 150 pounds, those grown commercially are sold for eating when they reach 1¼ pounds to 2½ pounds, he added. From the time a catfish hatches until it reaches that size at least two years elapse, Block said.

The sessions were devoted to discussions on diseases, off-flavor, financing, bookkeeping, feeds and nutrition, polyculture, various methods of production, and the role of the small farmer in the industry.