Catfish farming is increasing in state

Catfish farming is increasing in Louisiana, but Mississippi Delta areas in Mississippi and Arkansas still have a lead in the market, according to Sanders. Sanders raises fingerlings, and is education coordinator for the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission.

"There are big fish farms in the delta area compared to Louisiana," Sanders said. "Here, crawfish farms are growing and are catching more than catfish farms. But fish farming is more in existence now than it was when I got started 15 years ago."

Fish farming can consist of raising fingerlings, which are used to stock ponds, or raising market fish, Sanders said. Some fish farmers, he added, also provide feed in a fish, in which people pay a small fee to fish and then pay so much per pound of fish caught in a pond.

To get into fish farming, according to a guide the commission compiled, an individual should become educated on the proper raising of fish, and the reproducing, feeding and harvesting of the fish.

Sanders said it also is important to be aware of potential health hazards to fish, treatment methods, proper water treatment, and cost-effective means of feeding fish and maintaining ponds and holding areas.

The commission recommends a high clay content in the soil being considered for a pond. Good drainage, an adequate water supply and good bottom topography should be considered, according to the commission.

In the guide, "Channel Catfish Farming in Louisiana," the commission also provides information on expenses involved in fish farming, market projections and the latest research information.

The commission reported that it can be expensive to begin a catfish farming operation, but, if done properly, a return on the initial investment can be obtained.

For Sanders, raising fingerlings has proven to be a successful business venture. Although he does raise a limited amount of catfish for marketing, the bulk of his family operation is in raising fingerlings.

"I don't have a very large fish farming, but because fishing interferes with the feeding habits of the fingerlings," Sanders said. "It takes about a year to raise a 4-inch to 10-inch fingerling, and another year to raise a fish 1 to 1½ pounds to sell. That means for marketing it takes two years of feeding and caring for them to get them to market size, and that means more money to do it."

Sanders said he uses four breeding ponds to provide fingerlings for his farming operation.

During the late winter, he drains the ponds and cleans them. Next, "nests," which consist of 15-gallon metal drums opened at one end, are put into the ponds. Up to 25 pairs of adult fish and a dozen nests are put into each pond, he said. The female fish is added, are also given a hormone shot to promote reproduction prior to being placed in the pond.

Between May and July, the fish begin to nest, he said.

"The male goes in and cleans up the nest and then picks a mate," Sanders said. "Then the female goes in and lays her eggs. The male will run her out and then fertilizes the eggs, and there can be as many as 5,000 eggs. He'll watch over them, humping them every now and then to circulate water through and provide oxygen to the eggs."

Within eight to 10 days, he said, the eggs hatch. A short time later, the small fish will leave the nest. The drums are then picked up, and the dead fish are removed with nets, leaving the fingerlings in the pond, Sanders said.

"The fingerlings are fed for about a year, and harvested during the winter. Sanders said cold temperatures lessen the shock to the immature catfish, "and keep them from fighting so much when they're harvested."

During the growing season, Sanders said, a careful watch is kept on the ponds to prevent overcrowding, which can cause a shortage of oxygen in the ponds. A watch also is kept for signs of disease.

When the fingerlings are harvested, they are collected from the pond, treated to a large, aerated holding bin. Larger fish are separated from the fingerlings, as well as bullfrog tadpoles and any other undesired fish.

Because the fingerlings often are caught during harvesting, they are treated in the holding bin with an antiseptic to prevent infection, Sanders said.

At that point, they usually are sold by the pound for large orders, or at 15 cents a piece for small orders.

Maintaining a catfish farm is time-consuming and expensive, Sanders cautioned, but can be profitable if done properly.

"You've got to check on the ponds every day and make sure everything is going smoothly," he said. "This is a seven-day-a-week job, and somebody's got to keep an eye on things."

"A lot of things can go wrong, and you can lose fish before you know it. But once you figure out what needs to be done and when, then it gets to be fairly routine. We're not going to get rich off of this, but it's enjoyable." But because of the initial expense and continuing work involved in catfish farming, Sanders cautioned would-be catfish farmers:

"Fish farming definitely isn't for everybody. There's a lot of literature available on fish farming, and I'd advise everyone to check it out before leaping into fish farming."