Catfish farming is a gamble

By JAY WORKMAN
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"Most of it is pure pleasure," Allen Dessell says of his catfish farm. "This isn't really a business, it's more of a hobby," said Dessell, who retired in 1977 from Ethyl Corp. in Baton Rouge to his place in Tangipahoa Parish.

"This is farming, and anybody who knows anything about farming knows it's a gamble," he said. "If you have to buy the land, there's no way you can come out ahead.

"The experts tell you that with an initial investment of $300,000 you can make a go of it. Anybody with $300,000 would be stupid to put it into catfish farming.

"Some people claim you can raise 10,000 pounds per acre of water. Don't bet your job on that," he said.

Dessell got started in 1966 after reading a story in the Sunday Advocate's Parade Magazine about fish farming. He now has eight ponds for production as the fish reach maturity and one for breeding. The ponds range in size from less than an acre to four acres.

"Four acres is too big," Dessell said. "It takes too many people to seine it. And seines cost more than $3 a foot."

Two men can handle a 150-foot seine, and ponds should be no wider than that, he said. Fish are taken from a pond for transfer or to clean the ponds, which tend to fill with sediments or fish droppings.

"Aqua-culture is relatively a new thing," he said. "The best information is out of Auburn University or the University of Arkansas."

Dessell feeds his fish floating pellets made commercially from corn and soybeans.

"Catfish are peculiar. They won't feed if the air is under 60 degrees, and they don't like it hot either. They like the water around 80 to 90 degrees."

Dessell runs a "catch your own" operation. His ponds are open every day but Sunday, and anglers pay $1 a pound for the fish they catch. On Fridays and Saturdays, an average of 50 to 100 fishermen try their luck, he said.

"I can take out and market 150 to 300 pounds a week if I dress them myself. That's the part I don't like," he said. His ponds are closed between the second week of November and March 1, and from the second week of June to Sept. 1.

"We like to do some traveling, and that schedule gives us a little free time," he said.

Another fish farmer in Tangipahoa Parish, J.Y. Davidson, sells all he can grow to a restaurant in Hammond, Murphy's Seafood. He has nine ponds totaling 14 acres.

"I build houses for a living. This is a side job," Davidson said. "You'd need 50 acres to make a living at it."

He said he and his son sometimes skin a weekly harvest of 2,000 pounds, live weight, on Saturdays. Often he has to buy fish from other growers to supply his customer.

"When they hatch, there's probably 100,000 little ones in a one-acre pond. You can grow 2,000 per acre to two pounds every year."

Davidson's ponds are fed by artesian wells and drained annually by underground pipes. The water has to be aerated during the summer by spraying it into the air. He drives along the levees in a small trailer with a machine that throws the catfish chow into the ponds every day in the summer and occasionally in the winter.

Because catfish don't lay eggs on the bottom, large cans are placed in a pond and the 3-year-old breeding fish deposit eggs there. Davidson then takes the eggs out of the cans and hatches them in a tank with rotors that keep the water circulating. In the wild, the male catfish fans the roe with his tail. In five to eight days the eggs hatch, and the babies are placed in a clean pond.

"At $5,000 or $6,000 an acre for land and $2,000 to $3,000 more to build the ponds, the interest on your financing would be more than you could produce," Davidson said. "You can't do this as a business unless you already have the land."

"I'm glad I don't get tired of eating catfish," he said.