Company to process fish at former clothing plant

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PORT BARRE — St. Landry Parish, fishing for new industry, has landed an important financial catch.

Aquaculture Technologies Ltd., which operates a catfish and striped bass development and research farm at LeBeau in the northwest corner of the parish, now plans to process its products here at the former Garan clothing plant, located on U.S. 190.

"I guess this means we are here to stay, just in case anyone had doubts," said the company's chief aquaculturalist, Greg Lutz.

Corporate headquarters for Aquaculture Technologies Ltd. is on Park Avenue in New York City, but the company also has offices in Belgium and coordinates several overseas projects.

In Louisiana, the corporation has its headquarters in Lafayette. "Our staff in Louisiana this year has grown quite rapidly as a subsidiary of the parent company," Lutz added.

The company's Port Barre processing plant, which should begin operations late in the spring of 1989, will initially employ approximately 400 people.

If the plant becomes fully operational, with a three-shift production schedule, Lutz estimated it could mean as many as 1,000 jobs in the next five years for the parish's depressed economy.

St. Landry Parish, decimated by the decline of the oil and agricultural industries, has consistently ranked in the top five of the state in unemployment and has an unemployment rate 12 percentage points higher than the national average.

The use of the former Garan building by Aquaculture Technologies involved a complicated financial agreement among private industry, state government and the town of Port Barre.

"The town of Port Barre bought the building from Garan, and the state guaranteed the loan," explained Sen. Armand Brinkhaus, D-Sunset.

"During the 1987 session of the state Legislature under (former Governor Edwin) Edwards, the state authorized the action for every town in the state that had a Garan plant.

"As a result, five or six plants were sold to municipalities. The towns borrowed the money, and the state guaranteed it," said Brinkhaus.

Port Barre paid $300,000 for the Garan building, which was completed in 1976 and vacated by the clothing company four and a half years ago.

"What the aquaculture company is doing is essentially taking the city (Port Barre) off the hook by paying off the mortgage," added Brinkhaus.

Earlier this month, Jack Summers, chief executive officer of Aquaculture Technologies, gave Port Barre Mayor Dorris Godet a down payment of $38,000, to begin paying off the note on the Garan building.

"Our town has suffered very much because of the economic problems," Godet said. "We've had a lot of bankruptcies around here and having the Aquaculture company come in here can do nothing but help us out."

Godet explained Port Barre had bought the Garan building in February of 1988 and had been shopping for a tenant ever since.

"Basically, it was up to us to find a buyer to take over the purchase. Since July, we have been negotiating with the Aquaculture people. We talked to a few other people about the Garan building, but everyone was moving slowly. Aquaculture came forward, and they took an option on the building and made the first payment."

Godet's enthusiasm is tempered by the immediate effects of the Aquaculture Technologies purchase, however.

"We're excited, but I don't know how much it will help us immediately," Godet said.

Aquaculture Technologies began its LeBeau operations in May and currently is using 1,000 acres for catfish and striped bass breeding and research. Another 1,200 acres in the northern part of the parish will be bought and utilized soon.

Lutz envisions the LeBeau facility expanding to as many as 2,200 acres and becoming fully operational by June 1989.

"The operations at LeBeau are production-oriented with research and development," said Lutz. "But buying the building at Port Barre made a lot of sense and was a good deal for us.

"We were also a little anxious to do something to make a stronger set of roots in the parish."

The purchase of the Garan building will be for processing only, Lutz said.

"The processing will be there, along with the packaging of other value-added components. This would be the packaging of things such as breaded products, smoked products or things like fish sticks. Shipping and packaging will also be done at Port Barre."

Lutz conceives of a day when the company would handle 10 million pounds of fish per year and ship 50,000 pounds of fish per day between LeBeau and Port Barre, a distance of nearly 40 miles round trip.

The company's chief aquaculturalist stopped short of providing specifics about the transformation of the Port Barre purchase from a garment building to one used for fish processing.

"Anything I said would be premature," explained Lutz. "There is a lot of work to do in converting the plant, and we are going to make sure we meet all the criteria in terms of environmental standards."

The company, Lutz said, is prepared to help farmers, suffering from a decline in agricultural prices, to begin catfish and bass farming at an entry level.

"We will be glad to work with the farmers to start catfish ponds of their own, and we, in turn, would be willing to buy their products, provided they meet our specifications," Lutz pointed out.