Cormorants, a federally protected fish-eating bird, sun on a pier and pilings at Cross Lake near Shreveport last month. New federal regulations will allow fish farmers to kill the birds, which fish farmers say are devouring small fish and crawfish. The permits are subject to state approval. The new regulations apply only to fish farmers and not the public.

Cormorant Concerns

Farmers may be allowed to kill birds that eat profits

By RAYA TAHAN
Associated Press writer

NEW ORLEANS — For farmers in 13 states, it's a $714 million-a-year industry.

It's an investment and a return these folks believe shouldn't be going to the birds, namely double-crested cormorants.

These long-necked diving birds are devouring fish near their roosts, and fish farmers have said there's nothing left to do but start shooting them.

Now, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has opened the way for fish farmers in those 13 mostly southern states to kill cormorants. According to the USFWS, the new regulations will save the nation's aquaculture business $20 million a year.

Rusty Gaudet, manager of a 600-acre catfish farm near Lafayette, said he loses $600,000 worth of catfish to cormorants each year.

The birds' population is growing at 6 percent to 7 percent each year in North America, said John Trapp, the biologist who wrote the order. That increase is directly related to the growth in aquaculture operations.

The large, black birds spend fall, winter and spring along the coasts and large lakes of North America. They are easily spotted, often standing still on rocks while spreading their wings out to dry.

Their population rise has mirrored a 10-year rise in aquaculture, said Dwight LeBlanc of the Louisiana Department of Agriculture.

"It's the wave of the future," said LeBlanc, a director of animal damage control. "It's a fairly reliable food source, without getting high concentrations of mercury and other chemicals that we don't want to eat."

Catfish farming is the largest part of U.S. aquaculture and the hardest hit by cormorants, said David Harvey, an Agriculture Department economist.

In 1987, U.S. catfish farmers produced 280.5 million pounds of the fish and grossed $173.3 million. By 1997 they made more than twice as much, selling $525 million pounds of catfish and grossing $373.8 million.

Professional and sport fishermen are excluded from the order. It covers includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas.

Before farmers may begin shooting, their state Wildlife and Fisheries Departments must approve the federal order. Farmers will have to show they also use non-lethal methods to scare the birds away.

Gaudet, president of the Louisiana Catfish Farmers Association, uses noisemakers, propane cannons and inflatable scarecrows. He pays workers to drive around the farm to shoo birds away.

"I've got a full-scale harassment program," he said.

"It's running me $26,000 to $30,000 per year," he said. "Some fish farmers already have a Fish and Wildlife permit that allows them to kill a small number of cormorants, but they said it's not enough of a deterrent.

"The difference between a harassment permit with and without limited take is day and night," said Gaudet, who is allowed to kill up to 150 cormorants each year. He is awaiting state permission for a permit with unlimited take.

Not everyone agrees the new order is necessary or effective.

"It's inhumane," said Peter Paris, spokesman for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "You really can't blame them for not being able to tell the difference between a manmade fish farm and an ordinary lake."

Falmouth, Mass. biologist Ian Nesbit, who studies the fish farm-cormorant subject, said although cormorants eat fish, they might not be causing economic damage. They could even be thinning the stock of fish, allowing them to grow faster.

"Generically the farmers love stock," he said. "What hasn't been shown is that cormorants affect the output of fish. That's what's so shocking about this whole thing."