Fish farm plans for second bass harvest

By Karma Champagne

Rapid growth, excellent size, good flavor and an excellent market price are proof enough that commercial farm-raised hybrid striped bass can be a viable industry in the state of Louisiana.

Walter Landry of Jeanerette, owner of St. Mary Fish Hatchery, started the commercial operation three years ago with the intention of raising both redfish and hybrid bass.

After successfully harvesting 7,000 pounds of hybrid bass in the early part of the year, St. Mary Fish hatchery is preparing for a second harvest in the latter part of May, according to Wally Landry, aquaculture manager of the farm.

With hybrid bass selling for three times as much as the commercially raised catfish, the hybrid bass is proving to be a successful industry for the Landrys.

One of the hybrid striped bass' exceptionally good characteristics of commercial production is the rapid growth period. From spawning to harvest time requires only two years before the fish are ready for market.

Glenn Thomas, a biologist from Louisiana State University said the large size and good flavor derived from striped bass combined with the tolerance of pond conditions by the white bass makes the hybrid an excellent commercial farm raised fish for the state.

The young Landry said the spawning process begins in spring because that is the natural spawning time for the bass. The process is a 24 hour-a-day job for 15 consecutive days to accumulate the 1.5 million eggs needed for the 1991 harvest. As many as 500,000 eggs can be lost if timing of the fertilization is not accurate within 30 minutes. After hatching, the fish are kept in feeding tanks until large enough to be transferred to the ponds.

"The hybrids are adjusting to our climate very well. They have survived water temperatures of 27 degrees in the winter and adjusted to 92 degree water in the summer," Landry said.

Meanwhile, research on the redfish continues. After a 70 to 80 percent loss of the redfish, the project was put on hold temporarily. Landry said the redfish were unable to adapt to the change from natural to artificial food. While some redfish are reaching marketable size, it has still not reached commercial quantities.

"We're planning to get started again with the red fish in the fall," Landry added. St. Mary Fish Hatchery, the only hybrid fish hatchery in the state, is ready to open the market with its 70 acres of ponds and hopes of a possible expansion to include 500 acres.

Ralph and Kaco's Restaurant in Baton Rouge were the first to introduce the stripers on their menu. Landry said they are also presently looking into shipping some of the fish into the New York area.