Fish farming means big bucks

LEBÉAU (AP) — Fish farming could bring thousands of jobs to St. Landry Parish over the next five years, says the head of a company which plans a farm and processing plant in Lebeau.

“Louisiana is perfect for aquaculture and aquaculture is perfect for Louisiana,” said Jack Summers, chief executive officer of Aquaculture Technology Ltd.

He told researchers, industry personnel and government officials Thursday that the plant could directly and indirectly create more than 15,000 jobs and generate more than $500 million in value-added sales.

Summers said pollution and overfishing have kept the nation’s annual catch from growing. The United States imports nearly $9 billion worth of fish a year, making it the second largest non-military item on the annual deficit, he said.

“That’s criminal. We should be growing our own fish,” he said.

Summers said aquaculture was “just a game in the United States” 12 years ago, but 140,000 acres of catfish ponds now produce 1 billion pounds of fish each year.

The amount of farmed fish worldwide rose from 2 percent in 1982 to 17 percent last year, he said. A recent LSU survey shows that the supply of catfish will not meet demand until 2015, he said.

Europe imports 60 to 70 percent of its fish, he said.

“We can sell all the catfish we can in Europe with no problem,” Summers said.

He said aquaculture has transformed Mississippi’s economy and created a vast infrastructure of support industries. The industry there has strong state support through Delta Pride, a state-backed cooperative.

In Louisiana, Summers said his company has found the state administration cooperative and has enjoyed its relationship with LSU.

“I believe southern Louisiana has the opportunity to become the number one aquaculture producer in the world,” he said.

Louisiana has two more growing months than Mississippi, excellent land, three times as many aquifers than Mississippi, good labor and a good infrastructure, he said.

Louisiana has college educated, skilled and unskilled workers and university programs for research and extension, Summers said.

Summers said he expects his company to grow 100 million pounds of fish a year after five years. It may buy another 100 million pounds a year from local farmers, he said.

A Mississippi study found that every 10 million pounds of fish produced and processed there translates into 1,200 jobs, he said. Summers said the total impact could exceed $1 billion.

Louisiana Agricultural Experimental Station and the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service worked out aquaculture technology more than 20 years ago, but nobody was interested because good money could be earned in oil and gas, said Dr. H. Ross Caffey, chancellor of the LSU Agricultural Center.

Mississippi, which did not have an oil and gas industry, took Louisiana’s aquaculture technology and went with it, he said.

“The Mississippi Delta is one of the greatest aquaculture areas as far as catfish,” Caffey said.

Louisiana now has 135,000 acres of crawfish ponds and 10,000 to 12,000 acres of catfish ponds, he said.

LSU has one of the greatest aquaculture centers in the world and a unique opportunity to assist the industry in Louisiana, Caffey said.

Joseph W. Freeland, chairman of Agro-Flex — a non-rural economic development program for southwestern Louisiana — said Louisiana products traditionally have been shipped to other states for processing and marketing.

This has left the state with few skilled workers, few companies with marketing departments which can compete nationally, and almost no research and development, said Freeland.

Freeland said modern processing facilities are a cornerstone of business. Once such plants are in place, more technical, skilled and semi-skilled workers are needed, and the tax base will be expanded, he said.

“Without processing, the industry will just go nowhere,” he said.