Fishing for survival

U.S. catfish industry suffers from foreign competition

AN INDUSTRY IN CRISIS

This is the first in an occasional series on the future of Louisiana’s struggling seafood industry. Click on this headline at theadvsercer.com to join the conversation and be part of this continuing story.

Jeff Moore

Cafish farmers and fishermen across the state are draining their ponds and hanging up their hooks as low fish prices and high input costs make it tough to keep afloat in the struggling industry.

Competition from overseas has held fish prices in check during the last decade, while production costs have increased steadily with inflation and rising costs of feed. As a result, cafish pond acreage in the U.S. has declined by more than a third in the last decade.

Those that remain are fighting back against imports by waging a campaign to establish U.S. catfish as a superior product.

Farmers have sought federal and state labeling laws requiring restaurants and grocery stores to label their catfish by county of origin. A move they hope will help jumpstart domestic production.

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Survival

“We’re like a frog in the bottom of a barrel right now,” said Steve Stephens, president of the Louisiana Catfish Farmers’ Association. “We’re looking for anything right now that can help us.”

Cafish is the leading aquaculture industry in the United States, with about 550 million pounds produced domestically in 2008.

About 95 percent of the nation’s catfish comes from Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas and Louisiana.

Soaring feed prices and an influx of cheap imports have cut into catfish production in recent years.

Production peaked at 660 million pounds in 2003, but has been decreasing ever since, according to Catfish Farmers of America.

Cafish production has dropped off at an even faster rate in Louisiana, from 65.7 million pounds of catfish in 1999 to 19.9 million pounds in 2008.

“We’ve lost a lot of producers in the last five years,” said Stephens. “With the economies like they are, the biggest factor is low prices.”

For Stephens, the downturn started three years ago, when rising prices for soybeans, corn, and wheat caused feed prices to skyrocket.

Cafish prices, meanwhile, have lagged around 76 cents a pound for the past decade, with imports from countries like Vietnam and China keeping prices low.

Stephens said his own North Louisiana farm has faced “huge losses” over the past two years, forcing him to scale back his farming operation by 50 percent.

“Just about everybody I know in this business is cutting back,” he said.

The situation isn’t much better for wild-caught catfish, the production of which has also dropped substantially this decade.

Henderson Mayor Sherbin Collette has been fishing commercially in the Atchafalaya Basin for most of his life, and has never seen market conditions as tough as they are now.

Imports hurt everything — shrimp, crawfish, catfish, you name it,” Collette said. “It crippled us to a point where we’re barely surviving.”

Collette faces additional challenges as a commercial fisherman — including competition from catfish farms.

Wild caught fish sell for a lower price — about 45-50 cents a pound — and are often passed over by wholesalers in favor of pond-raised fish, Collette said.

“There’s no market for wild fish,” he said.

Collette sells most of his catch to local seafood restaurants and individuals from a shop near his home.

“But it’s getting tough to make a living, he said.

“I hope I never have to stop, because this is my first love,” he said.

Some relief may come in the form of new laws passed earlier this year.

The Louisiana Catfish Marketing Law, sponsored by state Rep. Noble Ellington, D-Winn Parish, requires restaurants and retailers to label any catfish they sell with the country of origin.

Castille said agriculture officials are currently developing a certification program to implement the law, and should begin performing early inspections next year.

State Rep. Fred Mills, D-St. Martinville, authored a separate bill that seeks to launch a “public safety marketing campaign” to warn consumers of possible health hazards of eating Chinese seafood and touting the benefits of state-grown and caught seafood.

Also created was a Seafood Safety Task Force to further study Chinese seafood and report back to the Legislature.

Cafish farmers have long complained that substandard aquaculture is practiced in Asian countries.

Vietnam has built a burgeoning industry raising catfish in ponds and cages along the Mekong River.

“Most of these fish are raised in pens in polluted areas,” Stephens said. “They can bring that filet, even after shipping, for half of what we’re trying to do it at a loss right now.”

The industry is also trying to address imports by adding catfish to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety programs.

The USDA currently regulates all meat products, but does not inspect seafood. The inspection of seafood is now administered by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

A provision in the 2008 federal Farm Bill transferred regulation of catfish from the FDA to the USDA.

But the FDA continues to maintain responsibility for inspections until the USDA is ready to take over next year.

Until then, some states are taking matters into their own hands.

Alabama ordered a halt to the in-state sale of Asian catfish after a shipment had already cleared U.S. customs and FDA inspection tested positive for a banned antibiotic.

The Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry is working with the Department of Health and Hospitals to perform similar inspections in Louisiana, said LDAD assistant commissioner Carrie Castille.

“People want to know where their food comes from,” Castille said. “Louisiana has great quality products, and we need to be able to capitalize on that.”

Photos by R.C. Pierson, pierson@theadvsercer.com

Basin fishers Sherbin and Lourlisa Collette clean their morning catch of catfish recently in their Henderson fish store.

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