Gator farming a growing industry

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ALBANY — There are more alligator farmers than dairymen in Livingston Parish.

“Livingston Parish and only five dairies left,” said Donald Herring of the Albany area, who does both.

“At one time there were 40 or 50 dairies in the parish,” Herring said as he explained the new addition to the dairy farm he’s run since 1953.

“It can get hot putting up hay, but this alligator barn is really something,” he said.

Heaters keep the air and the shallow water in the tightly insulated barn at 90 degrees, because that helps the gators grow.

“You walk out of the barn and it feels like it’s air-conditioned outside,” said Mike David.

Herring and his two sons-in-law, Jerod Coats and David, spent the last five months building the 140-feet-by-38-feet barn and are stocking it with 8-inch alligators. The gators are three to five days old.

The little gators are kept in 96 trays that measure 8-feet-by-16-feet and are in three tiers. The treated plywood bottoms of the trays are slanted to hold water 8 ½ inches deep along one side and have about 8 inches of dry wood on the other side, where food is placed.

Wire mesh keeps the crop from escaping.

There are 50 alligators in each tray. They’ll stay there until they’re four feet long and ready for harvest, which Herring said should take about a year.

The critters eat commercial dry alligator food from Washington Parish, vitamins and frozen fish or chicken, six days a week.

“The people at Rockefeller Refuge do studies on alligators in the state,” Herring said, “and they say don’t give them any fat. They say they’re subject to gout.”

The trays are drained and cleaned each day, with the old water going into a lagoon that is 130-feet-by-170-feet and 7 feet deep. The pond was designed by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service to meet state and federal environmental standards. Waste water from the lagoon will be pumped out and spread on a field used to grow hay for Herring’s cows, said District Conservationist Robert Vernon.

“I saw an operation like this up in Wisner in north Louisiana that my son told me about,” Herring said. “I like to have something going on, and I believe it’ll pay off.”

“You have to get permission from Wildlife and Fisheries first, then find a landowner who’ll give you

See Gators, 3B
Herring said that the Gator business will be good for several years, but he also said, “I’m not getting out of the dairy business.”

Herring’s eggs were taken from nests in Terrebonne Parish on land belonging to Continental Land & Fur Co.

“When they hatch, he calls and we pick them up,” he said. “There are 4,100 in the barn now. Next year we’re going to try to incubate our own.”

Eggs cost $6 apiece, but there is no guarantee they’ll hatch, Herring said. Healthy hatchling gators are $25. Buyers are paying $33 to $35 a foot for four-foot animals to convert into hide and meat, he said.

“I’ve got to contact Wildlife and Fisheries and buy a $4 tag to put on each one I sell,” he said. “I have people come by and offer to give me an alligator they know about, but I don’t want them. That’s like trying to have an eagle without a permit. We keep a daily record on the temperature of the water and the air and if any die. We have to report monthly on any we lose. We don’t lose many.”

Herring said there are 65 alligator farms in the state, and part of their agreement to obtain the necessary permits is to supply 17 percent of the crop to state Wildlife and Fisheries officials for return to the wild.

He said less than 17 percent of alligators hatched in the wild survive to adulthood.

“I think the alligator business will be good for several years,” Herring said.

He also said: “I’m not getting out of the dairy business.”