Huge seafood plant set in St. Landry

OPELOUSAS (AP) — An international seafood company has announced plans to begin construction next month in St. Landry Parish on a fish farm described as the largest of its type in the world.

David Norton of Aquaculture Technologies Inc., a New York-based firm, said the company will develop 2,200 acres near Palmetto, about 20 miles northeast of here, for catfish farming and other projects.

A research institute will be built along with processing and packaging facilities, he said.

“This is the world’s largest contiguous integrated aquaculture facility,” Norton claimed. “We are an international aquaculture company, and we’re locating our headquarters for our food products division called Le Topper Foods down there.”

Norton estimated his company’s investment in the project will be between $4 million and $6 million range.

Groundbreaking ceremonies will be May 5. Several hundred workers are expected to be hired at the site, he said.

The company already has facilities on four continents and has developed large catfish farms in Mississippi, he said.

The operation will produce fresh catfish at the start, but researchers will also look into the possibilities of raising striped bass and developing new strains of crawfish, he said.

The Aquaculture Technologies Research Institute (ATRI) planned for the site will work with researchers at LSU, according to Norton. The chief aquaculturalist holds a doctorate from LSU, he said.

“We have already hired several people and we’re looking to hire more qualified individuals,” Norton said. “We will be putting up freezers and smoking facilities.”

All of the products from the plant will be marketed internationally under the Le Topper brand name, he said.

The proximity to the Le Topper facility in Mississippi, the available work force and the tradition of crawfish farming in the area were factors that went into the decision to locate the plant in St. Landry, Norton said.

“Louisiana is kind of the center at this point for food development,” Norton said. “We really would like to be a part of that.”

Although some aquaculture operations with multiple sites have more total acres than the planned catfish farm, the facility will be the largest one-piece seafood farm in the world, Norton said.

“Everything will take place right there,” he said. “It will be a self-contained unit.”

Meanwhile, in a related development, officials in Terrebonne Parish announced that they had turned up an outlet for blue crab, black drum fish and possibly oysters.

Jim Edmondson, executive director of South Central Planning and Development Commission, said the United Fishing Agency of Honolulu is very interested in securing a supply of blue crab, processed or fresh frozen.

United Fishing Agency, a fish auction house, sells much of its products to Japanese buyers, said Phillip Prejean, the commission’s executive secretary.

The commission’s other prospects, although not as strong, are a processor in Ontario, Canada, and a Pensacola, Fla., company that specializes in flushing pollution from contaminated oysters.