Sounds of Hank Williams just right for baby gators

By MARY BROWN
Advocate correspondent

NEW IBERIA — It is an unlikely sight: Thousands of baby alligators enjoying the sounds of country music while eating and swimming in holding tanks.

That's what's happening at Alligator Farms Inc., housed in the Old American Seafood Building in Iberia Parish.

The country music lowers the alligator's stress level so they won't panic when people enter the building, said Lee O'Brien, wife of company President John O'Brien.

"All we want them to do is eat and sleep," she said.

John O'Brien, his attorney Ray Brown and Iberia Parish officials, discussed the 6,000-7,000 gators that are now in the plant where the alligators are raised from eggs until they get to a marketable size, which is about 4-6 feet.

O'Brien's company also will process crabs in the plant.

Michele Broussard, director of Iberia Parish's business development center, said that it will take about 12-18 months for the alligators to reach marketable sizes.

"Skins will be prepared and shipped to overseas markets such as Italy, Germany, Taiwan, France and China," she said.

The meat will also be sold to various countries, Broussard said.

Construction in the environmental chamber of the plant, where the gators will live, is ongoing. Brown said the chamber is in a closed system where the alligators will be housed in fiberglass tanks.

The water in the tanks will go through a 2,000 gallon fiberglass holding tank. The waste water will run into an oxidation pond, she said.

Brown said there is no need for a DEQ permit because there will be minimal runoff water.

John O'Brien said all of the alligator waste is captured in a big tank through a 300-ft. pipe. The fresh water comes through a part of that pipe and is reheated for usage.

Much of the solid waste is stored in tanks where it will be sold for fertilizer.

"We've got it down to where there's very little, or no odor at all," John O'Brien said.

John O'Brien said he bought most of the eggs, but he said some eggs will come from his Cameron Parish marshlands where he owns 14,000 acres.

Broussard and O'Brien said that the alligator industry benefits the parish and state. About $5 million annually is poured into the state's economy from the reptile industry, Broussard said.

Alligator skin can be sold for as much as $64 a foot.

Brown said he considers the company environmentally conscious. He said if the company picks up a nest of 100 eggs and puts them in an incubator, at least 97 of the eggs can survive.

"If we bring in 100 alligators, we put back 17 percent once they reach four feet," Brown said.

Brown said putting the eggs in an incubator helps the gators survive, because if all of the eggs stayed in the wild only about 3 percent would survive.

John O'Brien said he used to sell the eggs to other operations and has been researching the process for the past three years.