Takin’ a bite out of Lafayette

International alligator tannery reported to be heading our way

By Pamela Glisson
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Commissioner of Agriculture Bob Odom said Thursday that Lafayette will be the site of the first major international tanning facility in the state and in the country.

The action is thanks to $1 million in state funds, matched by another $1 million from a French company which will be the parent of the local business. In addition, Central Bank in Monroe is providing a $3 million loan.

Roggweiler Tannery of Louisiana (RTL), the name of the business here, is a subsidiary of Tanneries des Cuirs d’Indochine et de Madagascar, which has headquarters in Paris, France, and a tannery just outside of Paris.

Philip Roggweiler, one of TCIM’s owners, will be the principal of the local business.

“I want to thank Mr. Odom and all of his people,” said Curt Hoglan, president and CEO of the Lafayette Economic Development Authority. “He’s been working on getting a tannery to the state for seven years, and LEDA’s been working for four years to get it to come to Lafayette.”

Frank Millican, director of the Louisiana Agricultural Financial Authority, said Odom has “been around the world three or four times visiting the major tanneries, trying to attract someone.”

According to Millican, the process was delayed because the state initially didn’t have enough gators to justify a tannery. In the mid-80’s, he said, the state was producing about 25,000 wild gators per year.

The pace changed in the late 80’s, he said, when gator farms began adding 100,000-200,000 skins per year to the state market.

Now, Hoglan claims, Lafayette was chosen because “this is the middle of alligator country.”

Moreover, he said of several meetings with the French, “We made ‘em fall in love with Lafayette.”

The facility planned here expects to tan 30,000-35,000 alligator hides annually. It also might, to a lesser degree, tan other skins such as snake and lizard.

Millican said RTL is free to buy skins from anywhere, but expects to use Louisiana’s. “They’ll only purchase somewhere else if they can’t get enough here,” he said. That’s unlikely since the state produces up to 90 percent of the world’s gator skins.

So far, those skins have been shipped primarily to France, Singapore, and Italy, but Millican expects buyers now will descend here to get the hides.

He also hopes, along with other state and local officials, that the tannery will provide incentive for the start of various related businesses — for instance, makers of purses, belts, etc.

RTL will start buying hides in September with 30-50 full-time employees, said Mike Fonseca, company vice president. He believes another 50-75 employees may be used during peak processing periods.

And, said Hoglan, “Like any operation, they certainly expect to grow, and they’re in a building where they have the space to grow.”

RTL will be housed in the L.A. Frey Building at 105 Dorset St., off of Pinhook. Remodeling already has begun, with the company expected to use, at the outset, about one-third of the building’s 100,000 square feet.

“We’re just as pleased as we can be,” said Hoglan, who said many local persons from safety, utilities, etc. were “very, very cooperative” in working with the Roggweilers. He added of the family, “They have impeccable records. They are highly respectable and are known for their integrity.”

Millican said that although some tanning operations pose water quality problems, that is not the case with gator tanning, which uses no heavy metals. “We’re not expecting any environmental problems,” he assured.

Gator tanning, said Millican, is a “highly specialized process” requiring considerable skill and the Roggweiler family has been doing it for three generations.”