

# STUDY

*Catfish industry*



## strong economic force

By Keryn Page

While catfish producers continue to struggle with low market prices, an economic-impact study shows the industry is a vital part of Mississippi's economy. MAFES agricultural economist Terry Hanson coauthored "Economic Impact of the Mississippi Farm-Raised Catfish Industry" with two MSU Extension Food and Fiber Center professors, Stuart Dean and Steve Murray. Hanson said he believes the many benefits of farm-raised catfish to consumers can create a demand that will more than make up for low market prices since 2000.

"Fish is proclaimed as being an essential part of a healthy diet, and farm-raised catfish is an environmentally friendly solution to over-fishing of the oceans," Hanson explained, adding that another benefit of farm-raised catfish is the ability to produce a good-quality supply on a year-round basis.

"The answer to making the catfish industry profitable again seems to be expanding the consumer market for farm-raised catfish," he said.

The latest available figures show that Americans consume 1.04 pounds of fish per person annually, compared with 54 pounds of chicken per person.

But Hanson said Mississippians in particular should reconsider farm-raised catfish as a viable, healthy food choice.

"Today, more freshwater aquaculture is found in the Mississippi Delta than in any other region of the United States. It is vital that farmers, industry, researchers and government work together to ensure the industry continues to thrive," Hanson explained.

Besides its health benefits, Hanson said the catfish industry generated about 7,000 jobs in 2000, for a total of \$102 million in wages. These figures represent jobs directly associated with the production and processing of catfish and do not include the many jobs created in local businesses that support the catfish industry.

"In Mississippi, firms manufacture seine nets, harvest equipment and aerators for use on farms. Many sell chemicals and supplies to support farm operations. Local firms construct catfish ponds and contract crews to custom harvest ponds on smaller farms," he said. "In addition, annual budgets for feed mills include major amounts for maintenance of equipment and transportation fleets. Various firms provide services and materials to construct, equip and maintain processing plants.

"Several hundred truck drivers are employed hauling feed and feed ingredients, hauling live fish from ponds to processing plants, delivering ingredients and other supplies to processors and delivering processed fish throughout the country," he added.

As a result of these numerous support positions created by the catfish industry, Hanson said estimating the total economic value is nearly impossible.

Several improvements in the Mississippi farm-raised catfish industry have allowed for a more efficient, consumer- and environmentally friendly product.

"Three of the most important developments in catfish farming over the last 25 years have been changes in the way low oxygen is managed through increased aeration on the farm; using salt to combat brown blood disease; and development of the multiple batch cropping system," Hanson's report states. One impact of these and other developments has been farmers' ability to increase stocking density and harvest yields.

Catfish productivity has more than doubled since the industry's early years, from 2,500 pounds to 4,635 pounds of fish per acre annually.

Feed accounts for half of the total expenses of catfish farms. Changes and advancements in feed over the years have resulted in a high-quality, economically viable product. In 1974, the first feed mill was built in Isola, beginning a trend among farmers of producing feed specifically for the local catfish industry at their own feed mills.

"Over the years, catfish rations have been reformulated many times. Farmers, feed mill operators and university researchers have worked together to develop cost-efficient and high-yielding diets," Hanson said.

As the No. 1 catfish producer in the United States, with \$642 million invested in 2000, the future looks bright for the Mississippi farm-raised catfish industry.

"Mississippi's farm-raised catfish industry is a model world-class commercial aquaculture industry that is profitable, sustainable and environmentally sound," Hanson concluded.

Photos by Marco Nicovich

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