Alligator Production—Development of a New Agricultural Enterprise (1997)

The Situation

For several years, aquaculture producer Leo Ray had thought about raising alligators as a solution to dispose of his fish processing waste. The two major outlets for trout processing waste, mink farms and the local rendering plant, do not accept catfish and tilapia processing waste. Alligators also require temperatures between 85° and 91°F for optimum growth. Ray’s catfish farm is supplied by several artesian geothermal wells with average water temperatures in the mid-90s. With a free source of food and heat, the two major operating expenses of raising gators, the prospect of success looked pretty good. However, there were several obstacles blocking the path to success, including permit requirements and lack of alligator production information. In early 1993, Ray contacted the Cooperative Extension System for assistance.

Our Response

Working cooperatively with the Idaho Department of Agriculture, Idaho Department of Fish & Game and the Division of Environmental Quality, the necessary import permit, commercial fish rearing license and approved waste management system were obtained. During the one year period it took to procure all the permits, Extension contacted representatives of the alligator industry, researchers and Extension personnel in the southern United States to learn about alligator production and to obtain any literature about alligator farming. Working in a unique one-on-one situation with Ray, Extension has provided information and education over the last four years on a wide variety of topics including: facility design, nutrition, waste management, production practices, harvesting, processing, regulatory requirements and marketing.

Achievements

In early fall of 1994, Ray received his first shipment of 200 alligator hatchlings. The following year he ordered 300 more, and during the past two years, 3,000 additional alligators were shipped from Florida to Buhl, Idaho. Survival is excellent, averaging above 90% and growth rate at 3 inches per month is as good as or better than in the South. Harvest of the first batch began in 1996 when gators were between 4 to 6 feet in length. Alligators are grown for both the hide and meat. Hides are worth $15 to $25 per linear foot, and the meat sells for about $5 per pound at the processing plant. A 6-foot gator (meat and hide) is worth about $380. Due to the rapid expansion of his alligator enterprise, Ray plans to hire a full-time employee to manage the gators and three full-time employees in the processing plant. Also, rather than burying the catfish and tilapia processing waste, this material is a renewable resource adding to the earnings of this unique enterprise.
For More Information

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