

Shrimp Farming: New Way To Diversify Farm Business

If you've thought about diversifying your farm operation and you have a farm pond, Bob Boyd has a suggestion that might make you money. Why not try raising fresh water shrimp, also known as prawns.

"They're similar to marine shrimp, but larger and have a taste more like lobster than shrimp," says Boyd. "The tails can easily weigh up to 4 oz. each."

The Cobden, Illinois, farmer, started growing prawns just a year ago and netted more than \$3,000 per acre after his first harvest by selling them live at the farm on harvest day for \$8 per lb. "It's a novelty thing right now. People have been interested in buying direct and seeing where they were grown," Boyd says. "They can see you take them out of the pond and pack them in ice, so they know they're fresh."

He's also looking at selling them wholesale, servicing local restaurants. And he might launch a hatchery to sell young prawns to others interested in raising them commercially or just for their own use.

Prawns won't do well in just any pond. They need clean water that's between 70 and 95 degrees F. Boyd figures that in central Illinois, he has about 100 days from the time his ponds warm to 70 degrees until they cool below that temperature again in the fall. "It takes most of that time to grow them to marketable size," he adds. "Unless you have a way to warm the water, you probably won't be able to grow prawns north of about the center of Illinois."

Water can get too warm for them, too. "If the water temperature goes above 95 degrees, they mature, quit growing and your season is over," he says from experience. "I monitor water temperatures and if it gets above 88 degrees, I cool them by draining off about a foot and refilling them with fresh well water that comes out of the ground at about 58 degrees."

Prawns are very territorial and once they've claimed an area, they're very aggressive in protecting their turf. They will, in fact, eat their neighbors if they get too close or even if they get hungry.

Boyd says you can stock ponds at about 16,000 to 20,000 freshwater shrimp per acre (about 2 square feet each). "We've been working with mesh that we put in the ponds in folds to give us more surface area. We've found this artificial substrate nearly doubles our stocking rates," he says.

Boyd initially had feed custom made by a livestock and fish food processor. Now, Purina has introduced a special 36 percent protein prawn feed that combines grain, soybean meal and animal fat. The feed must sink and stay on the bottom where the prawns can get to it.

Boyd says there are only four or five prawn hatcheries in the U.S. He buys newly hatched prawns and then grows them in tanks until they're large enough to put into the finishing ponds. "The eggs have to hatch in brackish water. Then the larvae go through 11 molts in their first 25 days of life," he says.

Raising prawns is not foolproof. First, ponds for prawn production should be no deeper than 6 ft. You need to monitor the dissolved oxygen level of the water. Overfeeding can lead to excessive growth of algae that can rob oxygen and ruin the pond. "You have to feed carefully, watching to make sure they're cleaning up most of the feed,"



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Fresh water shrimp, also known as prawns, are similar to marine shrimp but larger.

he says. They're nocturnal, so feeding should be scheduled just before dark.

"They'll handle lower dissolved oxygen levels than most fish, but they do need oxygen in the water to survive. Ponds may need some aeration at times to keep oxygen content at the right level. When it's hot, I run my aerators all night, using timers to shut them off during the day," he says. "While you don't need it all the time, if you're not prepared with aeration, you could lose your entire crop in one night."

"There are some shrimp diseases but the species I'm growing is resistant to most known diseases," Boyd says.

Boyd scheduled a "Shrimp Festival" at the pond on harvest day to market his first crop. His only marketing costs are an ad in the local paper and a sign at the farm. It was so successful he had to turn would-be buyers away toward the end of the day.

"You could process and freeze them on harvest day and then sell them from a shop all year," he says.

He hopes to be able to supply other growers with juvenile prawns. "I'm buying post-larva prawns and growing them in my nursery," he says. He's estimating he'll be selling juveniles for about 12 cents apiece.

Boyd estimates that production equipment for a 1-acre pond could cost around \$5,000 if you purchased it, but figures people can put together most of what they need for under \$2,000 if they're willing to make aerators, find used parts, and install equipment themselves.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Bob Boyd Shrimp Farm, L855 Kratzinger Road, Cobden, Ill. 62920 (ph 618 833-6409 or 618 525-1419; E-mail: beejay@midwest.net.)



Cattle and even baby calves can step up into Frank's remodeled straight trailer without the aid of a chute.

Reworked Semi Trailer Loads at Ground Level

David Frank gets a lot of odd looks when he pulls into the pickup line to unload cattle at the local sale barn, says his wife, Donna.

That's because some people figure her husband doesn't have sense enough to get in line with the other semis. They don't always notice right away that his reworked semi trailer unloads at ground level just like a common stock trailer.

He put the trailer together because he didn't want to drag a portable loading chute along whenever he needed to move cattle from one pasture to another pasture.

Cattle and even baby calves can step into Frank's remodeled straight trailer from ground level, without aid of a chute or even a step.

He started with an out-of-commission 1966 Wilson trailer that he picked up for \$450. It needed some work, but not a lot. The trailer's tandem axles were set forward from the rear of the trailer about 8 ft. so he lowered the rear 8 ft. of floor.

Inside the door to the lowered deck, Frank installed a ramp and a double-hinged folding gate. The lower end of the ramp starts 18 in. inside the door, so cattle have a flat space to step on before they start up the ramp to the higher deck. A second gate on the upper level can be moved anywhere along the sides of the trailer to split the load into two sections.

Once the top deck is loaded, the ramp and the lower gate are folded out of the way, leaving an 8-ft. square lower deck area to be loaded last.

The upper deck holds 20 or 21 full-grown cows, while the lower deck holds another four or five. This allows him to haul about 26 cows at a time or it'll handle 52 feeder calves.

"I use it for hauling cows and calves out to pasture or to stalk fields to graze," he says. "It takes a lot less time and is much easier when you don't have to take a chute along for loading or unloading."

While he made the trailer for his personal use, it wasn't long before neighbors and even cattlemen in surrounding communities heard how convenient it was. "Within a year, he



A ramp runs from lowered section of deck to main part of trailer. Rear section of trailer was lowered about 18 in.

ended up hauling cattle for about 30 farmers and ranchers in the surrounding area," Donna says. "The unexpected income was a bonus and we also met some very nice people."

Farmers like Frank's service for several reasons: it's convenient (no chute); it's cheap (not everyone has a full load to transport); it's available (Frank doesn't truck for a living, so he's usually around to fit in a quick load or two); and the cattle stay fairly clean when hauling to market (only one level, with no cattle directly above others).

He spent about \$2,150 for steel (the entire floor was replaced with steel mesh), and then paid \$1,500 to have it cleaned down and painted after he was finished with the remodeling. With the initial \$450 cost, his finished trailer cost right at \$4,000.

Although there are new ground-loading trailers out there, their cost is hard to justify. In addition, Frank's fold-away ramp and gate create additional room in the back end.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, David Frank, 51788 875 Rd., Verdigr, Neb. 68783 (ph 402 847-3226).

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