

New Ways To Make Money On The Farm

Bullfrog Business Keeps Idaho Farm Hopping

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

Steve Rivas raises and sells around 6,000 bullfrogs every year. Most go to research facilities but a lucky few go to restock farm ponds, wildlife areas and backyard marshes. Rivas has shipped frogs to 43 states.

"People tell me they want their grandchildren to hear bullfrogs like they did as children, so they buy them for their ponds" says Rivas.

He and his wife started raising Native American bullfrogs in their living room in 1990. Six 32-gal. Rubbermaid trash cans have grown to become a full-scale production facility.

"At one time we were marketing up to 12,000 frogs a year, but it was taking too much of my time," explains Rivas, who also teaches aquaculture full time at the College of Southern Idaho, Idaho Falls, Idaho.

Rivas spends about two hours a day checking, feeding and cleaning his frog pens. A 102° geothermal well and another well that puts out 55° water keeps the frogs warm through the winter.

Pens consist of eighteen 4 by 6-ft. in-

ground tanks and 12 that are 4 by 10-ft. in size. Three 20-ft. diameter tanks serve as breeding pens for raising tadpoles. Water depth varies with frog age and activity levels.

The round tanks were made by setting old Harvester silo sections in place over a set of drains. Rivas then simply poured cement in the circle up to the height of the drains.

"We can keep about 150 large frogs per sq. meter in growing pens," says Rivas. "When we're getting ready to ship, I cut back on feed and turn down the temperature and put as many as 300 per sq. meter."

The key to producing bullfrogs is feeding them. Bullfrogs by nature only eat moving insects. For several years, the frogs required producing hundreds of pounds of housefly maggots each week. Eventually Rivas' wife came up with a way to get the bullfrogs to accept a nonliving food source. The method along with the food recipe is proprietary.

Maggots are still produced as needed. If antibiotics are needed, Rivas feeds them to the maggots and then feeds the maggots to



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the fish. "The bullfrogs will spit out medications fed straight, wipe their tongues off and not eat for a day or two," explains Rivas.

Rana Ranch sells only the frogs, not the feed, nor information on how to raise frogs. If people want to raise frogs commercially, he suggests they do as he did and go to school

for aquaculture.

"Get a job to support yourself and then figure out how to raise them," he says.

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Harry Benjamin built this pull-type pipe laying rig that digs a trench up to 6 ft. deep, lays in the pipe, and fills in the trench all in one pass.

State-Of-The-Art Pipe Laying Machine

Conventional pipe laying machines churn up a lot of ground and leave an open trench that has to be filled in later. Extensive re-seeding is required. Harry Benjamin, Shelby, Montana, thought there had to be a better way. So he built his own pull-type pipe laying rig that digs a trench up to 6 ft. deep, lays in the pipe, and fills in the trench all in one pass.

The machine is made from 2-in. thick steel and weighs about 50,000 lbs. Benjamin uses two, or sometimes three, Caterpillar D-8's - each with 275 to 300 hp - to pull it. He does custom work for ranchers in Montana and nearby states, which have been hit hard by drought in recent years. The pipelines he lays are used to deliver water from wells or reservoirs to tanks in remote pastures.

"I've used it to put in more than 220 miles of pipe during the last two years. It works faster than commercial excavators, so I can

keep my rates down. Best of all, it does a better job," says Benjamin.

The rig is equipped with a 2 1/2-ft. wide, 10-ft. long steel tooth that weighs 3,900 lbs. The tooth is raised or lowered by a pair of big hydraulic cylinders. As the machine moves forward, fine dirt sifts down under the tooth and into the bottom of the trench so the pipe sets in a bed of soft dirt instead of against sharp rocks. Benjamin returns later with a Caterpillar and drives over the mound of earth over the trench, leaving a mound only about 6 in. high.

"It leaves the soil profile intact with the topsoil still on top, unlike excavators which mix subsoil with topsoil and also throw the dirt out over a much wider area. As a result, there's no need to reseed the pasture like you have to do with an excavator. The minute I'm done packing the mounded-up soil, you can drive over it," says Benjamin. "I recently put in five miles of pipe in one day, whereas most

excavators can only do about one mile. I charge 65 cents per linear foot, plus a move-in charge of \$500. That's about half as much as conventional contractors charge. "Another advantage is that my equipment works better in rocky, hard ground. We can drag out rocks as big as Volkswagens. It's not laser-guided, but it doesn't have to be because the water is under pressure so the pipe lines don't have to be level. And because it's a pull-type model, it more closely follows the Caterpillar on turns than excavators that are directly attached to the tractor."

An unexpected benefit of delivering fresh, clean water by pipe to tanks on pasture, says Benjamin, is that cattle gain better. That helps pay for the cost of the delivery system. "Reservoir water is often dirty and tastes bad, so cattle drink only what they have to. Ranchers tell me that after they install a pipe delivery system, their calves often weigh 50 lbs. more by the next fall. Another advantage is

that the tanks can be located on higher elevations where the animals will graze nearby. Reservoirs are usually located in low areas, such as a dammed-up stream, so cattle stay nearby and don't graze the higher pastures. Ranchers say that putting a tank on top of a hill is almost like adding more acreage to their ranch."

This is Benjamin's second pipe layer. He built the first model four years ago and used it to put in more than 300 miles of pipe. He says he's willing to build the current model for others for about \$85,000. He also plans to build a 40,000-lb. model in the near future.

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