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Auburn University develops hybrid catfish

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A premium hybrid catfish that Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station fisheries researchers at Auburn University worked nearly three decades to develop and make commercially viable should be available to Alabama catfish producers this fall and is expected to provide a significant boost to the state's \$500 million catfish industry.

The fish that AU's Rex Dunham and others developed will be marketed as the Auburn University Hybrid Catfish by Eagle Aquaculture Inc., a new Auburn-based company whose sole product will be AU Hybrid fingerlings.

The AU Hybrid Catfish, a cross between a female channel catfish and a male blue catfish, grows faster, converts feed more efficiently, is more disease-resistant, is hardier, is easier to harvest and has a higher processed yield than the channel catfish state producers grow now. The hybrid, Dunham said, has superior performance compared to both parent species.

The catch is that channel and blue catfish don't mate naturally, so a major hurdle in the research has been to develop and refine artificial fertilization techniques that will hatch enough fish for production on a commercial scale.

Dunham has accomplished that, and at a leased hatchery in Montgomery, Eagle Aquaculture will begin production next month. Once the eggs hatch, Eagle will ship the tiny fry to two established west Alabama catfish producers to grow into 6-inch-long fingerlings, at which point they'll be ready to fill growers' orders.

Sam Lawrence, chief executive officer of Eagle, said the company will pace itself for growth.

"We will start relatively small to establish ourselves," Lawrence said. "Within five years, we want to be producing around 10 percent of the fingerling market."

Currently, that market for the U.S. farm-raised catfish industry is 700 million fingerlings annually.

He said he is not expecting a "mass conversion of the industry" to the AU Hybrid.

"Initially, we expect most producers likely will convert some, but not all, of their ponds to the hybrid," Lawrence said. "Over time, they can increase their hybrid production."

Channel catfish fingerlings typically sell for about 1.25 cents per inch, or 7.5 cents for a 6-inch fingerling. Lawrence said the AU Hybrid Catfish fingerlings, which should be available to producers in October, will cost more.

"It takes 18 to 24 months for channel catfish to reach food fish size, but the AU Hybrid reaches that point in approximately 12 months," Lawrence said. "There will be a premium on these fish, because they are worth more to the producer."

Lawrence did extensive market research before deciding to launch Eagle. Focus groups with west Alabama producers and with leadership of the Alabama Catfish Producers — a group that has been a key supporter of Dunham's research through the years — indicated growers were extremely interested in and ready for the AU Hybrid.

Dunham, who is working with Eagle on a consultant basis as chief scientific officer and technical director, said the commercial availability of the AU Hybrid will be extremely rewarding and exciting.

"Seeing the AU Hybrid in fish ponds around the state and region will be the ultimate accomplishment in my career," said Dunham, whose research to improve performance of the fish will continue. "If this is the only thing I accomplish in my career, I will consider it a success."

Eagle Aquaculture, a private company specifically formed to commercialize the AU Hybrid Catfish technology, is a subsidiary of Aetos Technologies, a technology development company Auburn University and a group of private investors co-founded in 2003 to bridge the gap between university-based research and the commercial market. Eagle has sole commercial rights to the hybrid technology.

In addition to serving as CEO of Eagle Aquaculture, Lawrence is chief operating officer of Aetos.