

The Canada Connection

Pam and Larry Wilkey, Carterville, Illinois

Production of Black Bass in Southern Illinois Coal Mine Lakes

Coordinator: Pam Wilkey

Location: Carterville, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$5,000

Grant Year: 2001

Project Number: FNC01-385

Pam and Larry Wilkey transformed a spring-fed, 15-acre lake into a lucrative business, producing largemouth and hybrid bass for sale in markets as far away as Toronto. The Wilkeys raise the fish in netpens, an unconventional but highly successful approach.

If you ever find yourself shopping in a Toronto market for fresh fish, do not be surprised if you come across largemouth bass that have made the long haul to Canada from southern Illinois. Just look for the market that has aquarium-like containers where you pick out your own live fish and they file it for you on the site.

Pam and Larry Wilkey raise these fish on lakes near Carterville, Illinois, seven miles east of Carbondale. They sell largemouth and hybrid bass to a company in Toronto, as well as to a second market in Chicago. But the Wilkeys' aquaculture operation never would have taken off without a SARE grant, which enabled them to transform an unused, 15-acre, spring-fed lake into a lucrative side business. They later added a 5-acre lake to the operation.

"I just thought this water could make us some money," says Pam Wilkey, who works in human resources for the state of Illinois. The Wilkeys also thought they would try something a little different; they would raise the fish in netpens, rather than raceways. Netpens are large, submerged cages, while raceways are long, narrow channels dug into the land.



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"Netpens are pretty unconventional," she points out. "People in this area hadn't raised fish in cages and they looked at us like we were nuts." But the Wilkeys have been successfully fish farming now since 2001; and since then three other operations have sprung up in the area, raising fish using their approach.

About 50 years ago, much of the land around Carterville was coal-mined, and a plethora of lakes sprouted up in the strip-cut areas. The Wilkeys purchased their land in 1994 from a man whose father coal-mined. But the idea to raise fish on this land did not come to the Wilkeys until they read in the local newspaper about someone else in the area raising catfish in raceways. So she contacted the Small Business Incubator at Southern Illinois University, which helped them get started and recommended the SARE grant program.

"We couldn't have done this without the grant. It enabled us to buy the pens and build the docks as well as buy the food," says Wilkey.

The Wilkeys bought six small pens with a capacity of 800 to 1,000 fish each from a

college student moving to Oregon. Today, they have expanded with the addition of six larger pens, which each hold 2,000 fish. In all, the Wilkeys now raise 17,000 fish—a significant increase over the 3,400 fish they raised that first year.

The Wilkeys do the harvesting from the dock, which the cages are attached to by bungee cords. After strapping a tarp around the pen to keep some water inside the cages, they hoist the pens out of the water and use nets to transfer the fish to large coolers, which have oxygen running through them. Their contacts in Canada pick up the fish several times a year, transporting them back to Toronto live.

During the first year of the project, the Wilkeys raised 1,600 smallmouth bass, 8,000 largemouth bass, and 1,000 hybrid bass. But they no longer raise smallmouth because of the difficulty in locating a source for them.

Wilkey says they have had to deal with some mortality losses, but it has not been too bad—typically about 10-percent mortality. 2007 has been the most difficult year, as they lost 1,000 fish. A fungus concentrated in one pen and worked its way into the fishes' livers. But they treated the fish with teramyacin and cured it.

Wilkey says their ultimate dream is to raise eggs from hatching until they are fingerlings and then transfer the fingerlings to a holding tank in a pole barn. When the fish get strong enough, they would be moved into netpens in the strip-cut lakes.

For Wilkey, the fish farm is her passion—something she wishes she could afford to do full-time.

"Truly, I enjoy it," she says. "It's something I can't explain. Some people like to run marathons. I like to raise fish."

By Jason Peterson