

Giving it Their All

Lyons Fisheries, Sandoval, Illinois

Reinventing the Family Farm

Coordinator: Brenda Lyons

Location: Sandoval, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$5,263

Grant Year: 2003

Project Number: FNC03-446

The Lyons developed a simple prawn farm, which has expanded to include tilapia and rainbow trout, with plans to add largemouth bass and hybrid striped bass in the near future.

Brenda and J.C. Lyons really did their homework. To create what is now Lyons Fisheries, a highly successful aquaculture enterprise in Marion County, the Lyons read stacks of books, did research on the Internet, visited other aquaculture farms, took some college classes and attended a University of Illinois Extension workshop on business plan writing.

"We even talked one farmer out of a couple of juvenile prawns so that we could observe their habits and cycles," Brenda Lyons adds. "Research was the key to our success."

After nearly five years of research, planning and construction, they created what began as a prawn farm. Today, Lyons Fisheries has expanded to include tilapia and rainbow trout, with plans to add largemouth bass and hybrid striped bass in the near future.

The Lyons received their first SARE grant in 2003 to develop the aquaculture operation. J.C., a machinist by trade, planned and designed the facilities, including a nursery, hatchery and grow-out ponds. Brenda helped with the construction and contributed her experience in accounting, management and marketing.

In their first year of production, the Lyons supplied four farms with 65,000 juvenile prawns. The second year they provided 10 farms with 143,000 juvenile prawns and finished construction of their grow-out ponds, which yielded 600 pounds of freshwater shrimp. The Lyons now hold



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an annual Prawn Harvest Festival in late September to promote the prawn farm and introduce the general public to freshwater shrimp.

In 2004, the Lyons received a second SARE grant to help expand the business. In the off-season, they grow red tilapia in the nursery in the two 9,000-gallon shrimp tanks, and the half-acre grow-out ponds are stocked with 7- to 9-inch rainbow trout fingerlings in the winter months. An aspirator aerator is used to keep the ponds from freezing. The Lyons then hold "Trout Fishing Days" for three consecutive weekends in April, and they offer a cleaning station and recipe booklet to help boost sales. Any remaining trout is vacuum-packed, frozen, and sold at the fall festival.

Like any new entrepreneurs, the Lyons encountered their share of problems. "In 2004, we lost our stock of baby prawns—twice," says Brenda. "The first time we had chloramine in our water source. We made two trips to Mississippi to replace what we lost and restocked our ponds, but herbicide overspray from a neighboring farm contaminated everything."

The Lyons eventually contracted with another farmer to grow prawns for them that year.

"In an aquaculture venture, when things get bad, they get bad real fast," says Brenda. "You need to be prepared ahead of time, as well as have the ability to move quickly to remedy the problems that can occur. Technical assistance is a must for every fish and shrimp farmer from coast to coast."

The Lyons are also learning how to scare off the blue heron that "fish" in their ponds.

"The herons do a lot of damage," says Brenda. "They poke holes in the trout, but the trout are so heavy the heron can't get them out of the pond after they've stabbed them, so of course the trout die and then we have a real mess."

Their successful venture takes its toll in other ways as well.

"We worked so hard for so long that I got very tired and overwhelmed," says Brenda. "There was so much interest in our project that we found ourselves giving impromptu tours. One day I had to stop in the middle of making a sandwich to give a 45-minute tour!"

Because Brenda and J.C. both work off the farm as well, Brenda says, "I just had to make myself slow down. This year, I'm playing catch-up. I hired a housekeeper and we have more help at the farm."

The Lyons also began charging for their tours and consultations, although school groups and other educational organizations often get a break.

The Lyons work hard to give back to the community. In addition to their regular tour days, they have set up educational displays at the DuQuoin State Fair, the Illinois State Fish and Shrimp Festival at DuQuoin, the Sustainable Ag workshop put on by the University of Illinois and the Heartland Aquaculture Conference.

The Lyons' advice for other potential prawn farmers?

"Do your homework," says Brenda. "Test your market and be prepared to give it your all."

By Leanne Lucas