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WARMWATER FINFISH

Most projections of future seafood supplies point to warmwater fish species, such as tilapia, cobia, sturgeon, etc. leading aquaculture's next big growth spurt. This month we report on the work being carried out on some of the main candidates

COBIA

Juvenile bottleneck threatens market

US DEMAND for fresh 'Culebran Cobia' farmed by Snapperfarm of Culebra, Puerto Rico, is growing so much that production needs to be increased very significantly, according to its American importer, **TOM WRAY**.

WRAY reports Jimmy O'Hanlon, of Miami-based importer IC Seafood, which distributes Snapperfarm's cobia, tells *FFI* that his customers love this premium saltwater fish and want more of it.

Snapperfarm currently grows its Culebran Cobia in limited quantities in two submersible offshore SeaStation cages moored two miles off Culebra.

"Right now, we are trying to raise money to fund an expansion programme," says O'Hanlon. "We need a hatchery and about 18 cages so we can harvest cobia at least very two or three weeks."

According to Snapperfarm's Brian O'Hanlon (Jimmy's nephew), the farm is going well, even though it now has no reliable supply of fingerlings.

"Our old source had serious problems producing this year and they plan to close their doors," he explains. "We are working on a few back-up sources for this summer."

"We are also in the long drawn-out process of modifying our permits to install



IC Foods' Jimmy O'Hanlon: "We need a hatchery and about 18 cages so we can harvest cobia at least very two or three weeks"

more cages in Puerto Rico. At the same time, we are investigating other islands in the Caribbean, as well as Central and South American countries, for expansion."

"We are producing some fish, but it is a lot more difficult than it used to be. It is a setback for cobia production."

TILAPIA

SOARING consumption in the USA is continuing to drive aquaculture's fastest-growing sector - tilapia.

This warmwater fish is now the sixth most popular seafood product among Americans, and while some is grown domestically, imports still dominate volumes on the US market.

Indeed, in just ten years, US tilapia imports surged from just a few thousand to a whopping 134,869 tonnes last year, worth around US\$393 million (figures from the National Marine Fisheries Service). This included 22,729 tonnes of fresh fillets,



Prime tilapia fillets - mainstay of US imports, worth \$393m last year



Snapperfarm says that its cobia are reared on the highest quality diet available using sustainable sources of ingredients

On Marine Farms' plans for a new cobia hatchery in Belize (*FFI*, April 2005), Myrseth explains that it will supply its own cobia farming operation in that country, with any surplus fingerlings being sold to third parties.

"If things go right, we should have fish in the water by the middle of this year and have our hatchery up and running in a year's time," he adds.

In the meantime, Snapperfarm is working with the University of Miami to ease the supply bottleneck.

"Miami University has a small hatchery and are starting to produce some cobia to help us out," confirms Jimmy O'Hanlon. "We are also seeking fingerlings from other sources."

Back in Florida, Jimmy O'Hanlon points out that his little doubt that cobia has

excellent market potential in the US.

"We sell Snapperfarm's cobia pretty much all over the US," he says. "We sell whole gutted fish, which right now are running at 8 to 12lb and maybe a little bigger."

"Fish harvested on, say, a Monday afternoon will be

with me on Tuesday morning and 24 hours later will be in restaurants in cities like New York and Chicago."

Culebran Cobia is considered a fine dining fish. The meat has distinctive fat and moisture qualities that make it very versatile. It can be grilled, fried, steamed,

broiled or served raw as sashimi or sushi.

Snapperfarm says all its cobia are natural, free of hormones, pigments, drugs and antibiotics, reared on the highest quality diet available using sustainable sources of ingredients.

Globally, there is no significant cobia fishery, as wild

adults are often solitary or travel with just a few other individuals, frequently in the company of sharks. Capture is therefore often incidental.

Never the less, cobia is highly sought after. Not only is it very tasty, it also grows very quickly, reaching 6 to 7kg just one year after hatching - three times the growth rate of Atlantic salmon.

And although commercial production has only just begun in the west, cobia already has a successful history in Asia, most notably in Taiwan where cobia is stocked in around 80% of ocean cages.

Bjorn Myrseth agrees that cobia has an excellent future in the US market. "We think there is a very big market," he tells *FFI*.

And while it may not achieve the same volumes as tilapia in the US - from just a couple of thousand tonnes of fresh fillets in the mid-1990s to 22,729 tonnes valued at nearly US\$140 million last year - that example reflects the tremendous market for white fish in the US.

The reaction to Snapperfarm's cobia from my customers has been excellent," Jimmy O'Hanlon says. "The only downfall is that we'll be out of fish in a couple of months and then we go back to the drawing board."

"It's difficult to promote the fish because a lot of guys don't want to put it on their menus. They know that if they can't get it every week there's not much sense in having it - that's the hurdle we have to get over."

In the meantime, investment is being sought. "There are about five of us that have kicked in money now," says O'Hanlon. "We are doing as much as we can, but the reality is that we need a serious backer to come on board."

■ www.snapperfarm.com

Consumers drive boom

valued at about \$140 million, 55,615 tonnes (\$183m) of frozen fillets and 56,524 tonnes (\$70m) of other frozen tilapia.

Most of the fresh fillets are imported from Latin America, led by Ecuador (10,600 tonnes in 2005), Honduras (8572 tonnes) and Costa Rica (3734 tonnes).

In the frozen fillet segment, China is by far the biggest supplier to the US market - 44,121 tonnes last year, plus another 30,884 tonnes of various frozen tilapia products. Two other big suppliers of frozen tilapia to the US are Indonesia - 6429 tonnes of fillets, 200 tonnes of other

products in 2005 - and Taiwan (3081 and 24,129 tonnes, respectively).

A large part of imported tilapia enters the US via Florida, and Miami has become the location of choice for many importers and distributors - the city is the main 'gateway' into the US for salmon and tilapia from Latin America, in particular.

An increasing number of these products are also being further processed in the country of origin.

According to NMFS figures, last year Miami's customs' district handled 22,945 tonnes of tilapia imports.

Hydrotech Drumfilter is the most sold filter for aquaculture systems all over the world. There are many sizes and versions, with diameters ranging from 0,5 m to 2,4 m.

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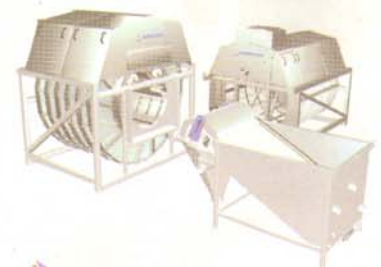
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