

## Lonoke County Agriculture

By Grant Tarvin

When most Arkansans think of Lonoke County, Arkansas, they think of mosquitos the size of small birds, lots of fish ponds, and fields upon fields of crops. Not many know that these rectangle ponds account for Arkansas' number one ranking in baitfish production. Imagine you're sitting in a boat in the middle of the river. You cast out your minnow, and your bobber is slowly pulled under. You set the hook and reel in a nice slab crappie, the catch of the day! Remember those little ponds you passed, without them your slab crappie may never of taken the bait, because without those little ponds, buying baitfish in your area may not be possible. "In the 60-plus years and four generations since I.F. Anderson dug and stocked the first farm ponds on his Central Arkansas farm, I.F. Anderson Farms has evolved into the world's largest producer of Golden Shiner Minnows."

Crappie, bass, catfish, hybrid bass, white bass, and several other species are known to feed on minnows. Fishing is one of the nation's top past times, and because of Lonoke County, it is easier to catch the fish sought after. In fact, as a state, Arkansas produces 167 million dollars in aquaculture revenue. Arkansas also exports six billion bait fish annually, so no matter where you caught your crappie, the minnow likely came from the Natural State.

Since Arkansas produces a lot of bait fish, you may wonder where Lonoke County fits into the big picture of the state. Well, Lonoke houses the largest fish farm in the world. Anderson's 11,000 square foot facility is capable of producing one billion bait fish per season. Anderson's has helped revolutionize the way bait fish are produced for years, and hopefully will for years to come.

While producing bait fish may not seem like much, more goes into it than what you would think. One of the largest economic impacts in our community is the jobs created by the farms. Everyone is acquainted with someone who works for one of these farms, actually my neighbor three doors downs works for them. The jobs produced are not just people who drive around and feed the fish either. Plenty of jobs are created on a higher scale too. Farms have their own personal marketers. If these farms cannot get their name out across the country,

then they would soon go under. There are also scientists working on more effective ways to produce the bait fish. In fact, Anderson's fish farm has developed a variety of bait fish known as the black salty. It is bait that can survive for periods of time in salt water or fresh water. It is known as the "Ultimate Bait Fish." Every day there are people working to improve the fish hatcheries in order for them to be more effective.

There are also several other industries that are boosted because of the bait fish industry. For instance, the metal for the buildings are bought locally, which stimulates metal building industries and supplies. The feed industry is heavily affected in order to provide for the more than six billion baitfish that are produced annually. A common food for the bait fish is soy bean meal, that is grown and ground right here in Arkansas. Several companies have thrived off of these businesses by selling everything from waders to spawning materials. One industry developed right here in Lonoke County is that of aquaculture transportation. The industry consists of large holding tanks filled with water and aerators attached to them, and help the fish farms transport their bait fish nationwide.

The bait fish industry has greatly helped and stimulated our economy. We are lucky to live right by such an amazing industry that also helps so many others in our state. Through creating jobs, stimulating industries, and helping your everyday fisherman all over the world, the Lonoke County bait fish industry is truly amazing.