

Diversity is a Good Option

**Catfish Producer Tries Something Different –
Alabama Raised Shrimp**

*by Julie A. Best
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Dickie Odom of Greene County has been a very successful catfish producer for many years. "Catfish is still our mainstay," says Odom. "But, diversity is a good option." In 1999, curiosity caused Odom to try something different—Alabama raised shrimp.

While talking with a young aquaculturist who was familiar with the farm-raised shrimp production in South America, the gentleman indicated that occasionally torrential rains flushed the pond salinity down to near zero. "My ears perked up," says Odom, "because the natural salinity in our aquifer is about five parts per thousand." The young aquaculturist indicated that the shrimp were not adversely affected by this low salinity condition. That was enough to get Odom interested in diversifying his operation to include shrimp production.

"I had a little one acre pond, and I ordered enough post larvae to stock the pond. That first year, we did everything wrong, backwards and everything else. But, 98 days after stocking the pond, we harvested 1,500 pounds of 14 per pound shrimp. The survival rate was awful, but the shrimp that survived did very well and were excellent. That told me we could do this," says Odom. Now, he just had to refine the process.



Dickie Odom raises white shrimp, averaging 16-20 count in size, which have grayish-white shells that turn pink when cooked.



When it's time to harvest, according to Odom, flexibility is a key factor. "You have to be mobile and adjust," says Odom.

"These animals are all about temperature," says Odom. They are tropical, so cold water is going to kill them. That means, stocking can't take place until about May. Odom obtains the post larvae, which have to be hatched in seawater, from the Florida Keys. "I set up acclimation tanks, pond-side facilities for receiving and conditioning post larvae, on the pond dams where the shrimp will be stocked. Seawater runs about 35-40 parts per thousand salinity. When we get the post larvae, the hatcheries will have diluted the salinity down to about 15 parts per thousand, and then they ship the post larvae to us," says Odom. Odom uses sea salt, just like people use in salt-water aquariums, to get his receiving tanks to the 15 parts per thousand ratio.

"When we receive the post larvae, we have to match the temperature in the receiving tanks to the temperature of the shipping tanks," says Odom. Then, about a three-day acclimation process begins. Odom explains that once the post larvae have been transferred to the receiving tanks, they are fed every two to three hours, around the clock. At the same time, water from the pond is introduced into the receiving tank at very low rates until the salinity of the receiving tanks matches the salinity of the pond. "It's a very tedious process. We can't bring them down too fast. We check the tank every time we feed for as long as they are in the tank," says Odom. Once the salinity of the two environments match, the post larvae are then moved to the pond.

The length of time between introduction into the pond and harvest depends upon survival rate. The lower the survival, or the lower the density, the faster the shrimp will grow. Odom says that the industry worldwide looks for about 70-80 percent survival. "Our shrimp are usually in the pond between 120-150 grow-out days," says Odom.

"There are several factors involved in shrimp production; proper levels of potassium, magnesium, and zinc are critical. In the last few years, we determined our major problem, which was lack of potassium in the pond. Since we've adjusted that factor, we are relatively comfortable that we can produce shrimp consistently now," he says.

The weather plays a major role in the shrimp farmer's life. "When you are dealing with something this small and dealing with something very sensitive to temperature, it's a delicate probability process. I never know what to expect. When harvest time comes, I've got to be mobile and flexible," says Odom.



Production is driven by market. According to Odom, the market for shrimp is there. Right now, he has more customers than shrimp.

What about the market? Odom has, and plans to continue, marketing his shrimp on-site. "We sold about 15,000 pounds this year, right here on my farm. Just people driving up and purchasing shrimp from us. That takes a lot of people to operate in this manner, but it's a system that works for me," says Odom. "We have more customers than we do shrimp at this point. Our average selling size, with head on, is 16-20 count."

Currently, Odom has four ponds of shrimp. This year, he grew 26,000 pounds of shrimp. He plans to build two or three more ponds. "Catfish is still our mainstay. At this point, shrimp is our tinkering product. We are comfortable with shrimp now. As long as we start with good post larvae, we can grow shrimp consistently here in Alabama. Production will vary, but we can justify continuing and expanding the operation," says Odom.

Odom is quick to give credit to lots of folks. "USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has helped with design of catch basins and the pipe headers that we use to guide the shrimp into the ponds. The research and technical assistance from Auburn University Fisheries Department has been helpful. A lot of folks have helped make this work for us," says Odom.

Most any farmer will tell you that they enjoy what they are doing; that's what keeps them in the business. Dickie Odom is having a good time with the challenges of raising shrimp. "A lot of people trust and enjoy our product," says Odom. That's enough to provide the motivation to continue.

The clay soils of the Black Belt region that brought about the installation of catfish ponds now is beneficial in the production of one more Alabama raised product—shrimp. That's another good commodity to add to Alabama's bounty.

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