

Farmer raises warm-water tilapia in cool Idaho

■ Aquaculturist adds two types of bass to Grace-area fish farm

By **RODNEY D. BOAM**
For Farm and Ranch

GRACE — John Lambregts, an aquaculturist and owner of Dutchboy Farms, recently added large-mouth bass and barramundi — or Asian sea bass — to his warm-water fish production facility along the banks of the Bear River near Grace.

Dutchboy Farms supplies fingerlings and stockers to many farms locally, as well as throughout North America and Canada.

In 1999, the Netherlands-born Lambregts found a geothermal spring — Smith Creek Warm Springs — with water flowing at 1,000 gallons per minute at 84 degrees. He introduced tilapia into the warm water and found they flourished there.

Raising tilapia in the crystal-clear waters of Idaho is an anomaly. The fish, considered an invasive species, cannot survive in water colder than 70 degrees. If they were to somehow escape into the Bear River, they would die from the cooler water.

Sometimes tilapia are referred to as aquatic chicken. They have large scales and more meat than trout, and don't have the fishy taste trout is known for. They feed on algae and other aquatic plants.

Lambregts, who holds a master's degree in agricultural economics from Texas A&M University, originally built a small hydroponic fish factory and cement raceways for raising large numbers of tilapia. He has added buildings and cement tanks as



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John Lambregts feeds freshly hatched barramundi — or Asian sea bass — in his warm-water fish-production facility along the banks of the Bear River on Feb. 24.



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Steven Baker fills a bucket of tilapia at John Lambregts' warm-water fish-production facility near Grace for some customers who came 70 miles for a load of fresh fish for a family gathering.

the operation grew to add other species of fish.

At one time, he sold about 55 tons of mature tilapia from

desirable in the fish market. The fish are meaty, but also hard to culture.

"Both fish are finicky, highly sensitive and are extremely cannibalistic. It seems to be working," he said. "Barramundi ... can spawn in brackish water (a mixture of sea water and fresh water). They are born male but turn female as they mature and can grow up to 50 pounds."

Richard Ambrosek, a graduate of the University of Idaho's agriculture program, is Lambregts' operations manager at the Smith Creek operation.

"It's not too bad of a job," Ambrosek said. "In agriculture, it's all about variety. You never do the same thing for very long before you are off doing something different."

The Caribou County farmer also raises cattle on the family farm near Grace. He said working with fish gives him a little diversion.

Ambrosek said to deliver their fish, they put them in plastic tanks and load them on top of a trailer, then the tanks have oxygen pumped into them to keep the fish healthy during shipping.

Dutchboy supplies most of its fish to the western part of the United States and Canada.

The waste produced by the fish is used to irrigate the fields downstream.

"Farmers downhill from our operation have been real happy to use our water for irrigation," Lambregts said. "They have never seen their crops look so good."

The USDA reported Americans ate 475 million pounds of tilapia last year, making it the most popular farmed fish in the United States.

his small operation. He also sells fingerlings to other aquaculture farms across the country. His goal is to grow and sell 2.5 million pounds of fish a year.

Many of Dutchboy Farms' tilapia customers are of Chinese or Hispanic descent. He raises darker tilapia for the Hispanic market and lighter pink ones for the Chinese market. The two also like different sizes.

Folks come from miles around to buy Lambregts' tilapia. Angel and Janet Virelas drove an hour in blowing snow to buy some of his fish. They usually make the trip two to three times a month from Logan, Utah, buying about \$100 worth of fish. They have friends who do the same.

Lambregts said the large-mouth bass and barramundi he added to his operation are highly