Alternative Crops for an Alternative Industry

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The number of family farms in the U.S. continues to decrease. It is not uncommon to hear that another farm or ranch is for sale and an auction is being held to liquidate equipment.

What seems to be the problem? One can place the blame on a number of factors. Perhaps the most prevalent factor is simply that farmers are not making enough money from their crops.

Aquaculture, fish farming, may be the alternative to conventional farming. Fish farming is more than just a niche market. Consumption of fish in the U.S. has grown greatly in the past 10 years. Americans consume more than 14 pounds of fish per capita each year. According to reports by the United Nations FAO, fish farming must be encouraged to provide high quality animal protein for a growing world population. The FAO also reports that the world's natural fisheries have reached the limit or ceiling of their productivity. The natural fisheries cannot support the needs of a growing world population.

World fish production increased from over 85 million metric tons in 1985 to over 110 million metric tons in 1995 (USDC). Food fish production in the U.S. increased from 308 million pounds in 1992 to 768 million pounds in 1998. Farm gate value increased from $261 million in 1992 to $978 million in 1998 (NMFS).

Besides the usual species like trout, salmon, walleye, catfish, and yellow perch, there are many other aquatic species which lend themselves well to aquaculture.

Aquaculture markets include food fish, baitfish, ornamental fish, sport/game fish, crustaceans (crab, shrimp, lobster and crayfish) and even mollusks (muscles, clams and oysters).

The Northern Aquaculture Center is engaged in development of a number of alternative food fish species such as yellow perch and sunfish. Tropical species for the aquarium trade such as angelfish, discus and various cichlids are also of special interest at the NAC.

The Northern Aquaculture Center is also working in cooperation with local tropical fish producers to devise culture protocols for some species of tropicals.

Raising tropical fish in northern climates may seem impractical, but an indoor system may produce as much as a half-pound of fish per gallon of tank capacity. Although this number is for food fish production, similar stocking densities may be possible for tropical fish. It is possible to make as much as $50 per pound raising tropical fish. Perhaps aquaculture is for you. Perhaps you have an unused pole barn or insulated building which could be retrofitted to raise fish. There are a number of options for fish farming, including outdoor and indoor culture.