



CALIFORNIA FARM BUREAU FEDERATION

Rebels with claws

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By Jim Morris

With their iridescent turquoise color, claws meant for mayhem and a cantankerous disposition, the aquatic product raised at Serge Birk's farm in Tehama County is a one-of-a-kind enterprise in the Golden State.

Birk owns and operates Redclaw Lobster Farm in Red Bluff, the only licensed business in the state where freshwater Australian redclaw crayfish are raised. In a nondescript greenhouse in the midst of heavy industry, thousands of the critters grow in tanks, where water quality, temperature and filtration are closely monitored and maintained.

It takes six to nine months for the crayfish to reach market maturity, which is about 10 inches from head to tail. At that point, Birk carefully harvests them and sells them to Northern California restaurants.

"We only sell this product live," Birk said. "This crayfish tastes more like a New England Maine lobster than any shrimp or prawn out there. They are delicate, firm, white and just fantastic. Everybody that has ever had an opportunity to taste them always asks, 'Can you produce more?'"

Birk said showing off live crayfish to chefs sometimes leads to comical results.

"I've had a few run away from the chef on their counter, which surprised them," he said. "That's why I always count them before I bring them out, to see if any of them jump off and try to make a run for it."

Birk and his wife, Beth, also raise koi and other tropical fish for the aquarium trade, supplying wholesalers in California. They raise up to 10,000 angelfish each month.

Birk works full time as environmental director for the Central Valley Project Water Association, representing farmers and other customers on water and federal endangered species issues involving fish and wildlife.

He has spent nearly 30 years working with fish, including as a federal fishery biologist, Peace Corps volunteer promoting aquaculture in the Philippines and district fisheries specialist for the Republic of Palau. He also owned and operated an innovative freshwater prawn farm in Nevada.

"This job is part of my life's path and journey," Birk said. "I'm most content when I can contribute to developing technologies for sustainable energy and food production."

He said his goal is to raise a ton of crayfish a month.

"Now that I've demonstrated I can grow them indoors, the potential is enormous," he said. "Harvesting shrimp or lobster in the ocean is getting more expensive and there are fewer of them to satisfy the live or fresh market. It's just a matter of time before large companies will be investing in similar ventures."



Serge Birk proudly displays his unique California crop, an Australian redclaw crayfish.

(Jim Morris is a reporter for Ag Alert. He may be contacted at jmorris@cfbf.com.)

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