NMSU research heads to commercial markets

Mesquite facility will see tenfold increase in company’s production

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LAS CRUCES – The day is not far off that you could sit down at your favorite Las Cruces restaurant and dine on a meal of fresh shrimp; a fine, pecan-crusted fillet of fish; and a salad — freshly-harvested from local fields and ponds — with every item on the plate grown just a few miles away.

The New Mexico Shrimp Co. is about to increase its capacity by creating a new production facility in Mesquite that will see the company take a successful New Mexico State University cotton and aquaculture technology and apply it as a private-sector business that has seen great success at home and abroad. The new facility, on Sequoia Street in Mesquite, just behind the John Deere dealership, will be roughly 12,000 square feet and will house 12 above-ground pools for the saltwater shrimp production, said Tracey Carrillo, assistant director for campus farm operations at NMSU and co-owner of New Mexico Shrimp Co.

A nursery area where post-larve shrimp are incubated before transferring to the grow tanks, water testing facilities and an outdoor area for showcasing product will eventually be included, he said.

The building that will house the operation is not expected until March or April, but the current production of roughly 1,200 pounds of shrimp at the Las Cruces location annually will increase to about 12,000 pounds a year when it is complete.

In addition, other crops will be grown on the site, utilizing the fertilizer water drained from the ponds, said co-owner Rodney Rance, who, after retiring at the age of 54, decided to settle in Las Cruces and keep himself busy with the project.

Diversification

“We will be using the water to irrigate pecan trees and a lot of vegetables,” Rance said. “All the waste that comes out of the fish tanks will be used to irrigate.”

For now, plans are to supply local markets, farmers’ markets and restaurants, with an eye to sell produce at the Mesquite location eventually.

“We are doing something that has never been done,” Rance said of the diversified operation. “We will be the first in the world doing what we are doing. In 20 years, no one will know who started this but people will be eating healthier. Our grand kids will be eating a lot healthier and will have an opportunity to have something they’ve never had in the desert — fresh fish and shrimp.”

From seed to shrimp

Currently at 200 W. Con-way Ave, a location that will remain open, the New Mexico Shrimp Co. was born out of an unlikely experiment. Researchers wanted to know if cotton seed could be used as a high-protein fish food.

While searching for the perfect testing system, those involved in the experiment decided that shrimp would be the perfect test subjects, Carrillo said.

Turns out, the project worked so well there were thriving, locally grown shrimp to spare.

Working with the NMSU Arrowhead Center, a business to sell the shrimp was born.

Now it’s thriving as well, as the table-ready shrimp are being sold and served in Las Cruces and Albuquerque.

And, like a shrimp in the desert, the business is unexpectedly growing.

The project has been a great success story for the technology licensing program, a location that will remain open, the New Mexico Shrimp Co. was born out of an unlikely experiment. Researchers wanted to know if cotton seed could be used as a high-protein fish food.

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A shrimp raised at the New Mexico Shrimp Co. is pictured Wednesday.

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And, like a shrimp in the gram at the Arrowhead Technology Incubator, said Theresa Lombard, the licensing associate at Arrowhead. The company has taken technology developed at NMSU and turned it into a one-of-a-kind commercial operation.

“It is a new endeavour,” Lombard said. “It started as NMSU and is still an experiment station and research project that was licensed out so it is more of the tech transfer and commercialization that was developed by NMSU.

“We are very excited about this,” she added. “It is NMSU-developed technology. It is new and novel in the sense it’s creating shrimp in the desert and catches everyone’s ear and eye.”

There is no environmental contamination in the process, which leads to a much higher quality product than fishing or harvesting in potentially contaminated ocean or freshwater operations, she added.

“This is game changing as far as people’s perspective on these things,” Lombard said.

“You can get high-quality and tasty shrimp in the desert. This is a paradigm changer.

“Who expected cotton (research) would lead to shrimp?” she added. “We want this to be a successful endeavour for our licensees and a successful example.”

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