

## Feeding Catfish: Now

Catfish feed (28-32% protein) comprised approximately 50% of Mississippi catfish producers operating costs in 2001. Feed remains the largest variable, or operating cost to producers. Due to depressed grain prices, the cost of catfish feed has remained relatively low. Unfortunately, pond bank prices paid to catfish farmers has remained low (\$0.55 to \$0.62 per lb) during the last two years, while the cost of production continues to range from \$0.65 to \$0.70 per lb. Understandably, this situation has created financial difficulty for many farmers trying to buy fish feed. In an effort to reduce feed costs, some growers have reduced the amount of feed fed daily, or have fed every other day, while others have offered feed less frequently.

Obviously, fish need to be fed if they are expected to grow and remain in good health. PAAC members received some skinny fingerlings coming from Arkansas this past spring. Malnutrition is even more serious in fingerlings than in stocker or food size fish since rapid growth occurs during this stage. Demand for fingerlings has declined due to depressed catfish prices received by growers. Fingerlings rely on more expensive feed (36% protein) and these producers have struggled to pay their feed bills as well.

The catfish industry has seen some acreage taken out of production, while other growers are reducing stocking densities or are not restocking fish at all. However, given the severity and duration of the low price to grower situation, the reduced production figures have remained a relatively small percentage (approximately 6-10%) of total catfish production. As domestic supplies of catfish inevitably decrease, the price paid to growers will increase. The question remains when or how soon will price recovery occur? No one seems to have an answer!

Nevertheless, cooperatively owned plants such as PAAC and other catfish processing facilities continue to depend on a steady fish supply to stay in business. When farm finances allow, it is critical that growers feed fish now so PAAC markets can be satisfied during the upcoming winter and spring months when fish are not growing. In addition to increasing the rate of growth, proper nutrition will reduce mortality due to disease which will make more fish available for harvest.

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