

BARRY'S PERCH 'N MORE

When he's not planting or harvesting his hundreds of acres of corn and soybeans in Union County, Barry Moffett is probably assembling grain bins for other area farmers. Or watching over his eight three-quarter-acre perch ponds. Or talking with customers in his Marysville butcher shop. Or filleting fish in his processing plant. Or starting a fish farm outside of Ohio.

Moffett, it seems, is a one-man diversified industry.

He started experimenting with aquaculture 10 years ago on his farm, intending to raise perch for wholesale markets. He still does that, serving companies that order up to 30,000 pounds per month. A few years later, he got into processing as well, with an FDA-licensed plant that can fillet 200 pounds of perch per hour.

Then he saw a retail niche and, in 2004, opened Barry's Perch 'n More, a Marysville butcher shop that sells farm-raised fish, beef, pork and poultry – and that has expanded into a source for exotic meats such as kangaroo, ostrich, wild boar, rattlesnake, python and alligator.

“The sky's the limit,” he said. Moffett's mini-conglomerate, Springdale Farm Supply Inc., also includes a catering business and a wholesale meat business in which “I can compete with the big guys.”

Trying to categorize Moffett's business shows the difficulty in defining local food. Because he gets many of his products from out-of-state and even foreign suppliers, and because some of his wholesale customers are outside Ohio, and his latest fish farm is in Alabama, Moffett does not fit in the local category. On the other hand, he has his own perch ponds and buys fish from other Ohio growers to sell in his local market. And his butcher shop has sold beef and pork from other Union County farms.

“Some of the beef is still local,” he said. “But there's not as many guys raising beef.” Moffett said he would gladly sell more local meat if Ohio's meat-processing industry expanded enough to encourage more locally oriented hog and cattle production.

He also expects to see more Ohio farms turn to aquaculture – something the Ohio Department of Agriculture encourages, with its recent hiring of an aquaculture specialist. The department's director, Robert Boggs, observes that Ohio has a huge deficit in seafood and needs to raise more of its own fish.

Moffett said Ohio fish farmers need to be educated about the size of fish the market demands, and to give the fish enough food and room to reach that size.