

Barramundi help Wheatbelt farm in



Morawa farmer David Coaker sits among NyPa forage grass grown using water from the property's deep drainage system. Pictures: Daniela Bewis

■ Jenne Brammer

Barramundi in the Wheatbelt? That's what one enterprising Mid West couple are farming in an effort to combat salinity and make a profit as a bonus.

David and Jane Coaker have set up the venture on their Morawa grain-based property by establishing a sophisticated salt-water barramundi farming facility.

After several years of trial and error, and considerable investment, their aquaculture operation has been up and running since early 2014.

Their extensive system uses a combination of pumped saline and bore water, which fills a series of tanks that are used to grow fish.

An important element is the monitoring equipment which ensures correct temperature, oxygen levels, pH, and pump flows are maintained across all tanks.

Mr Coaker said the process started when fingerlings weighing 5g-10g, generally purchased in cohorts of 12,000, were grown

to 100g in nursery tanks housed in a large shed.

Upon reaching 100g, the fish are moved into one of two 160,000 litre tanks based in a greenhouse, and grown to between 600g and 1.2kg.

These tanks were constructed from old truck tyres, plywood and a tank liner, and can farm up to eight tonnes of fish when fully stocked.

Mr Coaker said once fish reached about 600g, they started being live transported to Perth using specialist containers each holding about 250kg, and equipped with oxygen tanks and diffusers.

"We sell about half a tonne at a time until we run out of fish, leaving the remaining fish in the tanks to continue growing," he said.

Mr Coaker said he aimed to put through about three or four cohorts of 12,000 fingerlings annually.

It takes about nine months for the fish to reach the maximum weight of 1.2kg, though most are sold beforehand.

The system requires about a

third of the water to be replenished daily and the saline, nutrient-filled water that is removed is then used to irrigate a 2ha plot of NyPa grass, which metabolises salt and can be used as stock feed.

In terms of markets for the live fish, Mr Coaker's key customers are Asian restaurants based in Perth, with which he deals through specialist distributors.

"The Perth live market is a good market but it is very small," he said.

"We are still in the process now of trying to work out new markets for different species, in order to take it to the next level."

Mr Coaker said there was a market for fish sold fresh on ice, but the price was less attractive.

"This market is much larger and there is a lot of work to be done here in order to maximise returns," he said.

"Sales will range from supplying locally throughout the Mid West through to the big processors and retailers in Perth."

Although the aquaculture operation had evolved into a large

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David Coaker holds a 10-month-old barramundi grown on his Morawa property.

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