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Taylor Pryor has his hands filled with oysters.

Aquaculture

A shellfish glut? Hardly, but maybe someday. . .

By Barbara Hastings
Advertiser Science Writer

Three years ago, Hawaii's prawn farmers were afraid that if an export trade were not created for their luxury crop, there would be a glut of the shellfish on the market by the following year.

As it turned out, there was no major export market then — or now — and no glut either.

By this year, according to projections in 1978, the number of prawn-farming acres should have quadrupled. It didn't happen. There were nearly 200 in 1978 and about 273 now.

And there are fewer prawn farms than there were three years ago.

The yields projected for those ponds were way off, too. The state estimated a few years ago that there would be more than 900 acres of aquaculture ponds in Hawaii this year and they'd be pouring 2.2 million pounds of prawns onto the market. By year's end, actual sales are anticipated to be only 260,000 pounds.

Besides these fresh-water prawns, Hawaii was also to see huge production of oysters, catfish and other animals on the market that would have been raised in aquaculture systems.

These really haven't materialized yet, either, although Taylor A. "Tap" Pryor dedicated the remake of his Kahuku Seafood Plantation yesterday and promises millions of oysters for Hawaii and abroad.

What happened to the aquaculture industry? Was it a fantasy? The state of Hawaii doesn't think so and neither do the aquafarmers despite sagging production.

Rick Gibson, who heads Amfac's

Aquatech on Kauai and who helped devise all those figures three years ago when he was director of the state's aquaculture development program, remains confident of the aquaculture industry.

"I think the numbers are right, but the timing was off," Gibson says.

The state still is saying aquaculture will be a \$20 million business in two years and about \$300 million in less than 20 years.

This year, the total aquaculture industry was a \$5.5 million business, but two-thirds of that was in research, training and technology transfer. Only \$1.7 million was in commercial sales, a drop from last year's \$2 million.

Several things have plagued the budding industry. First of all, based on small-scale ponds, state scientists estimated almost a decade ago that it was possible to get 3,000 pounds of prawns per acre per year. That figure somehow went from a projection to a hard and fast criterion and was the yield farmers expected.

In actual operation, though, the average for the state's 23 prawn farms is only 2,000 pounds an acre a year. That's the same figure — 2,000 an acre a year — that University of Hawaii aquaculture economist Dr. Yung Shang says is the borderline. Over that, and you start making a little money.

Another trouble has been supply of baby prawns.

While some of the larger farms have their own hatcheries, the state's Anuenue Fisheries Research Center supplies most of the farmers with the baby prawns.

Over the past couple of years,

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