

money

SHELLFISH SHOW PROMISE

The state's rich resources mean the industry could take off once facilities are certified for safety

By Kristen Consillio
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Bruce Anderson has raised tens of thousands of oysters over the past two years at the 800-year-old Mollie fishpond nestled at the base of Kualoa Ranch.

The former state Health Department director and his wife, Debbie, have spent many weekends sorting and scrubbing oysters that grow in the nutrient-rich ancient Hawaiian fishpond owned by Kualoa.

The ranch and operators of at least three other fishponds have begun to raise Pacific oysters in hopes they will someday be able to sell them in Hawaii and ship them to other states.

It's a business with great potential for Hawaii.

Washington state's oyster industry generates \$200 million a year. Hawaii, so far, generates zero.

The problem has been government bureaucracy.

To sell oysters and clams from Hawaii, growers need the government to certify that the water they use is clean.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the state Department of Health are the two agencies that certify water quality standards for fishponds.

But the state has had no health inspectors trained to sample fishpond waters for more than a decade, nor does it have an FDA-certified laboratory to test the samples.

This could change soon. Last week state officials said the FDA will send inspectors to certify the state laboratories and train a local inspector, two steps needed before the state can approve fishpond operations. The FDA officials are tentatively set to come to Hawaii between Nov. 28 and Dec. 9, said A. Christian Whelen, administrator for DOH's State Laboratories Division.

The shellfish industry is highly regulated because it is one of the few food sources people can actually die from that is allowed to be sold and eaten raw, the Department of Health said.

Once the state laboratory is certified, it could take six months to a year before the fishponds are



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Bruce Anderson, who raises oysters in Mollie fishpond at Kualoa Ranch, gets help from Ku'uipo McCarty as he removes a PVC pipe from within a wire cylindrical cage that contains growing oysters. The pipe enables one person to easily rotate the cage as it floats in the water. Anderson, former state Health Department director, has been studying how oysters fare in Hawaii waters and said they grow much faster than on the mainland. "Oysters have proven to be very promising and have great potential," he said. "They are much more valuable than mullet or other species you might grow in a fishpond."



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University of Hawaii-Hilo assistant professor of aquaculture and sea grant program extension agent

cleared to begin selling.

The sale of oysters and clams could be a multimillion-dollar industry in Hawaii since there are dozens of Hawaiian fishponds that

could be suitable for growing, operators say.

Hawaii imports more than 85 percent of its seafood, according to Maria Haws, University of Hawaii-Hilo assistant professor of aquaculture and sea grant program extension agent, who is researching the growth of oysters in Hawaii fishponds.

Local fishponds would provide fresh shellfish to isle residents and visitors, Haws said.

"There are fishpond operators and private-sector businesses chomping at the bit to start oyster farming," Haws said. "Local chefs are very interested. ... We could be exporting as well. That's kind of the shame of not having oyster farms out here."

"We could create dozens of jobs within a year," Haws added. "It would make a major economic contribution to the ag industry in Hawaii and potentially be a multimillion industry."

Hawaii's fishponds are largely insulated from ocean contaminants and rich in nutrients that help the growth of phytoplankton and microalgae, which oysters filter and clean from the water, helping the ecosystem, as well.

The state's warm climate allows the organic matter to thrive year-round, which means oysters can grow year-round. The growing season on the mainland lasts just a few months.

"From our research we know if you grow it in a (Hawaii) fishpond, you get a market-size oyster in five to six months. On the mainland it takes two to three years," Haws said. "And most of the mainland areas have (anything from) disease to ocean acidification making it harder to grow."

At Mollie Pond the oysters have grown twice as fast as most growing areas on the West Coast, according to Anderson, who

launched the oyster trials for Kualoa.

"Oysters have proven to be very promising and have great potential," Anderson said. "They are much more valuable than mullet or other species you might grow in a fishpond. Here we have an extraordinary opportunity to start a new niche aquaculture industry that I think would be very attractive to residents and visitors. There's a huge marketing opportunity. People go a long way to get an oyster."

Lawmakers passed a resolution this year urging the Department of Health to move forward with the creation of a shellfish program for economic development.

"It can contribute greatly to part of the breadth of our agricultural products at the ranch and whole food security — the more things we can produce in Hawaii the better," said John Morgan, president and CEO of Kualoa Ranch.