

# Flooding Miss. River threatens catfish industry

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In a May 9, 2011 photo, one of the Simmons Farm Raised Catfish ponds is buried inside the levee near Yazoo City, Miss. It is hoped the levees will be high enough to protect the fish from the Mississippi River flood waters which could destroy the ponds's content and force a two-year rebuilding program of the pond. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

(AP) -- Catfish farming in Mississippi faces grave danger from flooding.

The rising [Mississippi River](#) and its swelling tributaries threaten to inundate an economic mainstay that generates \$200 million in annual sales. These new woes follow struggles in recent years against competition from Asian imports and high feed prices.

Mississippi is the leading U.S. producer of farm-raised [catfish](#), followed by Alabama and Arkansas. Catfish is Mississippi's seventh largest

commodity. But numerous challenges, including competition from catfish-like species called basa and tra imported from Vietnam and the high cost of feed, have led some catfish producers to fill their catfish ponds and grow [row crops](#). Catfish farmers say Asian growers produce a cheaper product by using chemicals that have been banned in the United States.

The flooding Mississippi River could spur even more Mississippi farmers out of business. Many of the farms are located in the south [Mississippi Delta](#), an area that is already flooding, even a week before the river is expected to crest at places like Vicksburg.

"If these ponds get flooded, the fish will just become part of the flood," said Taylor Webb, a spokesman for Catfish Farmers of America, a nonprofit trade organization.

"Once the water subsides, there are going to be a lot what you call junk fish in there. You have to drain the pond, get everything out and start over," he added.

It takes 18-24 months to raise a catfish to a size that it can be sold for food, Webb said.

Flood preparations have taken a hurried pace at some farms, like Simmons Farmed Raised Catfish near Yazoo City.

Harry Simmons has owned the processing plant and catfish farms for nearly 30 years. Now he's wrapping a [levee](#) around his home, business and about 400 acres of catfish ponds in an effort to save them. He estimates that will cost \$150,000.

Simmons plans to build levees around the core of his farm then move fish from unprotected ponds to those behind the newly constructed

barrier. He's not sure what to expect. Simmons' farm is at least 30 miles from the Mississippi River, but it's in the low-lying basin where the Yazoo River is backing up and spilling over its banks.

"We'll just have to see what's there when the water goes down," he said.

Webb, with the trade group, said there's no definitive count on the number of farms in jeopardy. He said 60 percent of the surface acreage of U.S. catfish farms is in Mississippi, and many of those are in the low-lying Delta.

"A lot of these farmers are located in some real danger areas," Webb said. "Some are doing more pre-emptive measures than others. Some people are spending tens of thousands of dollars putting up protective levees."

But he added, "Not everybody has the resources to do that."

Others are simply netting the fish out of the ponds and selling them.

Dick Stevens is CEO of Consolidated Catfish LLC based in Isola, which is among the largest catfish processors in the country. He said he's been buying all the fish he can from farmers in threatened areas "so we can minimize the economic hit to them."

Stevens said catfish production is already down and the flood could hurt future growth.

"I'm concerned that it will cause more people to exit the industry," Simmons said.

The catfish industry generates more employment than some other types of agriculture, so closed farms are an economic blow, said Andy Prosser,

spokesman for the Mississippi Department of Agriculture.

"Right now we're throwing out a lot of predictions on a lot of this farmland, including catfish, but we're not going to really know how much damage has been done until the water goes down," Prosser said. "In the areas it's going to be flooding, agriculture is the major driving force for the local economy. Catfish specifically is a major employer."

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