

was formed in February 2003 to unify the marketing cooperatives in the state through product networking, exploring new market opportunities and ensuring product quality. The **Kentucky Center for Cooperative Development** administers the new organization.

All these organizations received KDA grants to help with start-up costs in the late 1990s.

## Market development

Delegations from **Russia** and **China** accepted KDA's invitations for a visit during 2002, and in September 2002 Agriculture Commissioner Billy Ray Smith signed a historic trade agreement with **Cuba**. KDA in 2003 worked to clear the way for **cattle embryo sales** between Kentucky breeders and Mexico producers.

Individual producers are selling **Kentucky Fresh and Kentucky Proud food products** to major retailers. Wayne Shumate's WindStone Farms blackberry jam from Nicholas County can be found in many Kentucky supermarkets. Tim Tarter's Triple T Farm and Greenhouse in Nancy grows herbs for Wal-Mart.

Mennonite farmers in Casey County such as Elvin Shirk successfully use 19th century production methods to grow vegetables for Wal-Mart, one of the world's biggest and most sophisticated retailers.

The success of the Mennonite vegetable farm operated by Elvin Shirk in Casey County shows that tried-and-true farming methods can be used to fill the demanding product pipeline of the 21st century.



(USDA Photo Peggy Greb)

Catfish fingerling.

## Catfish

The **Purchase Area Aquaculture Cooperative**, which began in 1999, has helped bring catfish to prominence on the Kentucky agriculture scene.

Today 53 members produce about 2 million pounds of catfish each year on 436 acres in western Kentucky. The co-op, owned by its member farmers, buys the fish, then processes and sells it to restaurants, caterers, supermarkets and other outlets.

In early 2003 the Kroger Corporation gave the co-op a big boost with an order of 84,000 pounds of Kentucky farm-raised catfish to fill increased demand for fish during the Lenten season. The co-op is seeking to triple catfish production in Kentucky by 2005.

The co-op has used grants from KDA and other sources for start-up costs and equipment purchases.

The 2,400-square-foot processing plant and an adjoining hatchery and fingerling facility were built in 2000 with KDA grants totaling nearly \$350,000, along with proceeds from

farmer-members purchasing stock in their cooperative. The processing facility, located in Tri City between Murray and Mayfield, can process up to 1 million pounds of catfish a year.

Co-op president Tom French was a fourth-generation tobacco farmer until he quit growing leaf and leased out his tobacco quota. Now he has 10 acres of catfish ponds. French told *The Courier-Journal* of Louisville that he plans to add five pond-acres each year for the next decade, putting some of his former tobacco land under water to raise catfish.