

Lobsters ranch in Alberta

RED DEER, Alta. (CP) — The thought of a lobster industry in the middle of the Prairies seems as incongruous as a fall cattle roundup in Nova Scotia. Yet the industry is flourishing in central Alberta.

Doug Allen, 22, Dave Ashby, 31, and Blair Jones, 31, of Red Deer own and operate the Alberta Lobster Ranch near the town's Northland Industrial Park.

It is no small-time operation. Allen says his ranch competes favorably with Vancouver suppliers and some of his products are flown directly to Japan from Edmonton.

Allen reached into the frigid water and extracted a seven-pound Nova Scotia-bred lobster. "Some restaurant will buy him," he said. "I sold a couple that big the other day."

Allen is optimistic about the business. "I think it's going to go good. We are looking at getting into other things. We supply live crabs and live oysters, and we are looking at getting into king crabs." There is even a possibility the ranch will begin raising snails.

Allen and his partners have \$40,000 invested in the business. They first approached the Alberta Agriculture Development Corp. for a grant to develop a lobster hatchery. "That's when they told me to go out and get some experience — set this up first," he said.

The next step is to set up a retail store in a good location. Lobster fanciers are having trouble finding the present industrial park location of the ranch.

The sign out front specifies "Lobsters live or cooked." "Most people take them home cooked to a bright red," Allen said.

He first became interested in the industry while studying marine biology at University of Alberta. He considers the 110-square-metre ranch a stepping-stone to the hatchery he really wants.

"I think people are amazed this is happening right in the middle of the prairie. We have our own little ocean. We even have algae growing on the floor over here."

The "ocean" Allen refers to is 12 tanks, each holding 1,350 litres of water. One tank is used to mix iodized salt, water and other chemicals to simulate ocean water.

The lobsters, crated and packed in newspaper and seaweed, are airlifted from Nova Scotia to the ranch.

The tanks have a capacity of 3,650 kg of lobsters.

There now are only two types of lobsters — North American and European. Allen looks forward to the day when there will be a new variety — Alberta Lobster Ranch Brand Red Deer Reds.

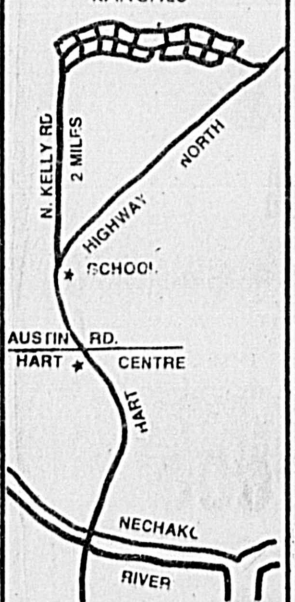
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