WARNER TOURS FISHERY, WEIGHS ROLE

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By AMANDA BUCK - Bulletin Staff Writer

U.S. Sen. Mark Warner toured Blue Ridge Aquaculture on Tuesday to learn about the company and its potential role in redeveloping the region’s economy.

Warner, a Democrat and former governor, said it was his first trip to the fishery in the Martinsville Industrial Park. He made the stop after spending the morning in Roanoke.

Warner said he wanted to see firsthand the work Blue Ridge President and CEO William R. Martin Jr. is doing and learn what role it might play in redeveloping Southside’s economy.

Martin says that role could be substantial.

“We could turn this into the fish capital of the world,” he said.

Blue Ridge Aquaculture is the world’s largest producer of tilapia using indoor recirculating aquaculture systems, according to its Web site. The company produces 4 million pounds of the fish per year and ships them to customers up and down the East Coast, according to the site and Vice President Jim Franklin.

Warner toured several facilities at the company, including an 80,000-square-foot “grow out room” in which tanks teemed with fish at various stages of growth. Each 58,000-gallon tank holds more than 30,000 fish, Martin said.

At harvest time, each tank produces between 53,000 and 55,000 pounds of fish, he said. Each one weighs about 1.75 pounds, he added.

It takes about nine months for a fish to go from an egg to the point that it can be harvested, Franklin said.

The process at Blue Ridge is a much more efficient use of resources, such as land and water, than traditional fisheries, according to Martin.

Martin and Franklin said they believe Blue Ridge Aquaculture, through a public-private partnership with Virginia Tech, could help educate entrepreneurs and farmers about better ways to produce fish domestically.

That is important, they said, because the United States currently imports about 80-85 percent of the fish Americans eat.

That makes seafood the second largest natural product that is imported behind oil, Martin said. And he said fewer than 2 percent of those imported fish are inspected.

Fish grown domestically, on the other hand, must meet U.S. standards, Franklin said. For example, fish grown at Blue Ridge Aquaculture are not treated with antibiotics, Martin said. Some Asian countries use antibiotics, he said.

Warner drew a parallel between aquaculture and the textile manufacturing that once was a mainstay of Southside’s economy.

Domestic textile manufacturing moved abroad because products could not be made here as cheaply as they could in other countries where inspection standards were not as strict, he said. If Blue Ridge could develop a model for growing fish safely and inexpensively in the United States, “This could be a chance for insourcing jobs,” the senator said.

Research and innovation are keys to making those things happen, according to Dr. George Flick Jr., who works in the food science and technology department at Virginia Tech. Flick has worked with Blue Ridge Aquaculture since it was founded.

Martin said the public-private partnership is key to doing that research, which could result in jobs in Southside and elsewhere in Virginia.

In addition to growing fish, research could be done in fish processing, he said. Most fish now are processed abroad, but doing that domestically with fish grown here could create jobs, he said.

Warner said he can help in three ways: looking for federal dollars to support the public-private partnership; looking into setting appropriate federal safety and quality standards; and making sure imported fish must meet those standards.

Last year, Warner requested $400,000 for Virginia Tech for the inland marine aquaculture project, which partners with Blue Ridge Aquaculture, according to Warner spokesman Rishi Parikh. Virginia Tech received the funds, and Warner submitted the request again this year for the agriculture appropriations bill, Parikh said.

Near the end of Tuesday's visit, Warner said he was impressed with what he saw.

"I think it's amazing," he said. "If half of their goals come true, the potential for growth in Southside is remarkable."