

US' largest tilapia RAS farmer keeps pedal to metal during pandemic, expands nursery

By [Jason Huffman](#) [View All 2020 in US RAS](#)



Blue Ridge Aquaculture, the US' largest recirculating aquaculture system-based grower of tilapia, has taken another step toward guaranteeing its independence from other vendors. It's spending about \$2.5 million to expand on its existing nursery operations, a project that it expects to be complete in the next three months.

The Martinsville, Virginia-based company, which was started in 1993 and became majority employee-owned in 2012, didn't say in a press release how many more fingerlings it hopes to raise in its 16,000 square foot nursery structure under construction. Blue Ridge already produces about 2,268 metric tons per year of live fish, roughly 14,000 pounds per day, from its 42 grow-out tanks.

But Martin Gardner, the company's director of business development, told *Undercurrent News* in an email sent Sunday that the new project positions the company for future growth.

"The new nursery will incorporate water reuse systems that we developed in our grow-out operations and will allow us to reduce our total water usage considerably," he said. "That not only reduces our operating expenses but also reduces operating risk."



From left: Bill Martin, the director of aquaculture; Matt Sharp, the operations manager; and Frank Hines, the project manager, all at Blue Ridge Aquaculture.

Founder Bill Martin told *Undercurrent*, during [a visit in 2018](#), how he was continuously working to make the 45-employee company more vertically integrated and, as a result, less reliant on outside vendors. Blue Ridge's roughly 25-year-old genetics program is now on its 19th generation of fish.

In 2000, Blue Ridge formed a trucking subsidiary to control the distribution of its product. Its two live-haul trucks deliver as much as 15,000 to 16,000 pounds per load. In 2017, it spent \$5m to build a feed mill, Blue Ridge Aquafeeds, ensuring a consistent supply of high-quality feed formulated specifically for its tilapia. *Undercurrent* reported in 2018 that it was capable of producing 73t of feed per day.

The new nursery will be located adjacent to the company's existing 90,000 square foot property, according to the release.

Next, Blue Ridge also is planning to expand its sales to include fresh and frozen fillets in the North American market, though it has not yet provided details on the effort. Martin told *Undercurrent* earlier how he previously toyed with the idea of opening a processing facility on the West Coast of the US.

Blue Ridge's recent expansion comes as many seafood producers are seeing reduced sales and expenses due to the pandemic shutting down or limiting restaurant sales. Gardner said the company's sales are down, too, as much as 15%, though it has yet to cut back on either staff or staff hours in response.



Martin Gardner, Blue Ridge Aquaculture's VP of business development, stands in the middle of the tilapia farm's existing built processing operation. Photograph by Jason Huffman.

He explained that the designs and construction for the expansion effort were started before the pandemic and would be costly to stop and restart later, adding that Blue Ridge has been positioning itself for expansion as it sees the domestic market aligning with its operating philosophy.

"It still makes sense to incorporate these measures," he said. "Consumers are demanding healthy, sustainable seafood, domestically produced with a high degree of transparency. We have been doing that for 30 years. The pandemic has brought to light the

fragility of international supply chains, especially for fresh foods. It has also emphasized the need for domestic aquaculture and strengthened our growth strategy."

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