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November 16, 2011

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REELING IN THE FACTS: CAVANAUGH EXPLORES WEST ALABAMA FISH FARMS

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November 16, 2011

Public Service Commissioner Twinkle Andress Cavanaugh visited three west Alabama catfish and tilapia farms Nov. 10 as part of her hands-on quest to learn how energy rates affect farmers' profitability.

Cavanaugh said she hoped the tours would help her understand how farms operate and what can be done to help make Alabama farmers compete on an equal platform with other states. After speaking with aquaculture specialists and catfish farmers, Cavanaugh said she had a great appreciation for what area farmers and experts are doing to benefit the state.

"When the government or an elected official can provide resources to a businessman or a farmer who will, in turn, use those resources to provide jobs for others, it's easy to measure if it's a good system. And when we have a product that can be exported from the state of Alabama, it helps everybody," she said. "The exports help our economy, and when you have a strong economy, it makes a better Alabama for everyone."

Alabama Farmers Federation Catfish Division Director Mitt Walker was encouraged by Cavanaugh's interest in west Alabama farmers.

"The Alabama catfish industry continues to be one of the major economic engines of west Alabama," said Walker. "We believe it is critically important to keep our elected officials abreast of the state of the industry. Thursday's tour of aquaculture farms highlighted the importance of reliable and affordable electricity and how vital it is to Alabama catfish farmers."

Providing a first-hand account of the importance of enhancing the state's catfish industry, Aquaculture Extension Specialists Jesse Chappel and Terry Hanson also attended the farm tours. Cavanaugh said she was pleased to find out how influential Auburn University and the College of Agriculture have been in helping Alabama farmers.

"Seeing what Auburn is able to do on an active scale, and what they've done to improve catfish farmers' productivity, is fascinating," remarked Cavanaugh.

Encouraged by the facts and figures gained from touring a few farms in the Black Belt, Cavanaugh said she feels more informed by the personal accounts she received in terms of electricity and energy usage on Alabama's farms than she was by just looking at statistics and data sheets. The education didn't come without a little jaw-dropping, though.

"When one of the catfish farmers talked to me about the price he paid for electricity on the catfish farm and what a large number that was, it was shocking," said Cavanaugh. "When you look at costs and expenses and the only thing he pays more for than electricity is the food that he feeds his catfish, it's mind-blowing. These expenses are a major part of the equation when determining if farmers can be profitable."



Alongside Alabama Farmers Federation Catfish Division Director Mitt Walker (left) and Extension Specialist Jesse Chappel (center), Public Service Commissioner Twinkle Andress Cavanaugh visited three west Alabama catfish and tilapia farms Nov. 10 to learn how energy rates affect farmers' profitability.

With energy rates on the rise, farmers continue to look for new and different ways to run their operations, reduce expenses and remaining profitable. To date, the top three operating expenses for catfish farmers are feed, fingerlings and electricity.