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PALACIOS (AP) — Several Texas A&M graduate students were up to their knees in muck as they slowly pulled a weighted net along a narrow ditch. A balding man dressed in a Mexican wedding shirt, slacks, watched the progress intently from the bank of the 33-acre pond, now drained dry except for the waterfilled ditch being dredged by the students.

Silvery mullet leaped over the proceeding net, but that was OK. When the men reached the end of the section they were dredging, the net was pulled up to reveal the prizes: five redfish averaging over two pounds.

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It was a day of hectic activity on this normally quiet tract of land west of Palacios as landowners, investors, A&M students and others gathered to harvest this much sought-after fish

The 2,000 acres of land owned by a trio of Houston businessmen is host to the only private redfish grow-out operation in the country, said Dr. Jack Castle Sr., one partner in the venture.

Castle talked enthusiastically of the project — a joint venture be-

tween himself, partners Leslie Appelt and Don Culwell and the A&M aqua-culture department — as he supervised the harvesting operations recently.

"Two years ago this started as a plaything rather than a business," said Castle, who originally leased the Palacios land as a duck-hunting site. "From that point (the early redfish experiments) we were surprised as to what we were capable of doing . . . the growth of the fish was phenomenal."

Marine Extension Agent Willie Younger connected the investors with the extension service's aqua-culture knowledge, as well as with the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife, which supplied fry to stock the ponds; A&M; and the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, which aided in pond designs

"Texas A&M provides the manpoind designs. "Texas A&M provides the manpower and records the data. We pay salaries for the individual (managing the farm)," as well as the cost of building the ponds and feeding the fish, Castle said.

Though he declined to pinpoint the investment in the project, Castle did allow that overall costs over the two years have exceeded one-half million dollars. Construction of a new 100-acre pond has been delayed, said Castle, because of expenses incurred to comply with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit rules.

Despite the current "in-thered" status of the venture, Castle said the whole point of it is eventually to make money. And the experimental nature of the project means that others can benefit from the mistakes of the Palaciosbased enterprise, he said.

