was formed in February 2003 to unify the marketing cooperatives in the state through product networking, exploring new market opportunities and ensuring product quality. The Kentucky Center for Cooperative Development administers the new organization.

All these organizations received KDA grants to help with start-up costs in the late 1990s.

**Market development**

Delegations from Russia and China accepted KDA’s invitations for a visit during 2002, and in September 2002 Agriculture Commissioner Billy Ray Smith signed a historic trade agreement with Cuba. KDA in 2003 worked to clear the way for cattle embryo sales between Kentucky breeders and Mexico producers.

Individual producers are selling Kentucky Fresh and Kentucky Proud food products to major retailers. Wayne Shumate’s WindStone Farms blackberry jam from Nicholas County can be found in many Kentucky supermarkets. Tim Tarter’s Triple T Farm and Greenhouse in Nancy grows herbs for Wal-Mart.

Mennonite farmers in Casey County such as Elvin Shirk successfully use 19th century production methods to grow vegetables for Wal-Mart, one of the world’s biggest and most sophisticated retailers.

The success of the Mennonite vegetable farm operated by Elvin Shirk in Casey County shows that tried-and-true farming methods can be used to fill the demanding product pipeline of the 21st century.

**Catfish**

The Purchase Area Aquaculture Cooperative, which began in 1999, has helped bring catfish to prominence on the Kentucky agriculture scene.

Today 53 members produce about 2 million pounds of catfish each year on 436 acres in western Kentucky. The co-op, owned by its member farmers, buys the fish, then processes and sells it to restaurants, caterers, supermarkets and other outlets.

In early 2003 the Kroger Corporation gave the co-op a big boost with an order of 84,000 pounds of Kentucky farm-raised catfish to fill increased demand for fish during the Lenten season. The co-op is seeking to triple catfish production in Kentucky by 2005.

The co-op has used grants from KDA and other sources for start-up costs and equipment purchases.

The 2,400-square-foot processing plant and an adjoining hatchery and fingerling facility were built in 2000 with KDA grants totaling nearly $350,000, along with proceeds from farmer-members purchasing stock in their cooperative. The processing facility, located in Tri City between Murray and Mayfield, can process up to 1 million pounds of catfish a year.

Co-op president Tom French was a fourth-generation tobacco farmer until he quit growing leaf and leased out his tobacco quota. Now he has 10 acres of catfish ponds. French told The Courier-Journal of Louisville that he plans to add five pond-acres each year for the next decade, putting some of his former tobacco land under water to raise catfish.